Sahithya Akademi Award-winning short story collection in Telugu

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English Translation
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The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From: Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.
Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

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SAHITYA AKADEMI

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Translator's Note

Kethu Viswanatha Reddy, popular as 'Kethu', has a place of his own among the Telugu creative writers. This collection has 30 short stories. They represent the author's insights into life, his sensitivity to human misery, selfishness, pettiness as well as love and friendship. While he depicts suffering with a delicate sensitivity, he paints out human shortcomings with a subtle satire.

This collection of short stories offers a kaleidoscopic view of life and society. There is passion, compassion, pathos, irony, satire and sadness; but no anger. The diversity of theme and tone allows the translator to escape monotony. The easy flow of language is a translator's delight.

I thoroughly enjoyed translating each story in this collection, especially The Peeru House (Peerla Savidi) and Grass (Gaddi). While translating the stories I employed some strategies to retain the original flavour of each story, at the same time bring out the meaning in the English idiom.

I have retained the kinship terms (eg: *abba, anna*), food items (eg: *karjikayalu, sangati*), caste names (eg: *kapu, madiga*), names of some indigenous gambling games (eg: *matka, mangatai*), indigenous weights and measures (eg: *kunta, sere*), typical ways of addressing people (eg: *saar, amma, alludu*), and some expressions which have special connotation like 'peeru'.

Some expressions in Telugu carry the flavour of the culture. Hence I thought they deserved literal translation

(eg: not to be taken as someone wearing bangles; like a stove of live coals on one's chest).

I could translate some stories with reasonable facility but I had to pause and ponder very often with stories like Evening Meal (Sanda Kabalam), Custom (Paddhati), and Back and Forth (Venuka Mundu). In fact, these titles in English, I think, do not measure up to the titles in the original.

I gratefully acknowledge the author's ready cooperation whenever I had a problem deciphering meaning of some expressions. His help and friendly demeanour have gone a long way in making this text what it is. I also acknowledge Dr S. Mohanraj's help in reading through the draft and suggesting changes. I am grateful to Sahitya Akademi for assigning this work to me, especially to A. Krishna Murthy for his patience and understanding.

I believe that no translation can be perfect in bringing out the author's intentions completely. This work is no exception. I welcome suggestions for improvement.

Jayashree Mohanraj

The Change

Right from my childhood I had been all ears when it came to stories. I had always liked storytellers and storywriters. Don't we all like it when they tell us or write about a world we don't know? Don't we close our eyes in ecstasy?

When I was very young, my interest in stories was aroused by my *jeji's* spooky stories. I still remember – in the story my *jeji* often repeated, my *abba,* Ranga Reddy, the village munsiff got the harvest done by ghosts without spending a paisa. I never saw my *abba* or the ghosts. My *jeji* said that the good days were over with my *abba* and that days of deceit had started. I felt sad indeed for whatever it was that was lost and whatever new that followed.

My *jeji* died when I was in the elementary class, and with her the good days of story telling. After that I had to confine myself to my school books. So what, they were full of stories from *puranas,* which attracted me. By the time I completed my high school education I had already read all the *Kasi Majili* stories, *Bhethala* stories and also the 'story of the man who lived after death'. In my college days I had chewed all those stories I came across which filled my heart with sweet thoughts and electrified my nerves.

The world of the stories I had read was wonderful. It was sweet like a toffee, intoxicating like rum. I must tell you how much the M A I studied helped me in the nurturing of my preoccupation with stories.

Unfortunately I couldn't continue with this for long. I completed my M A. I hadn't yet got a job. Meanwhile I lost

my father. Almost the entire property that my father and my *abba* had mortgaged was lost. What he left for me was a two-acre land, my mother, my M A degree, two brothers, and two sisters. I didn't know what came over me, but for the first time I was surprised that my life was not like the legendary heroes in the stories and novels. I started feeling some unknown fear and impatience with unknown people.

During those days I read a story. In that story an unemployed person commits suicide. The title of the story was 'murder'. I empathised with the character in the story. I was sure that I was in similar circumstances, which led the youth in the story to commit suicide. It was a new experience for me. The world of fiction, the point in the story- the helpless youth's suicide continued to chase me for some time like a mad dog.

Once I got a job as a copyist at the Collectorate, the mad dog stopped haunting me.

I happened to read another story written by the same author. It was about a harijan woman making a living cutting stones on the road-side, seeking treatment for her starving child who had fallen ill. The child meets a terrible death due to starvation and illness. The 'destitute' disturbed me immensely. Reading the story I came to the conclusion that my sister, undergoing treatment by the village doctor for TB, would die. But my sister did not die as it happened in the story. It is true that instead of feeling happy I did sometimes feel sad. I couldn't understand why I had that devilish mentality.

It was precisely in those days that I met Jayachandra who wrote the two stories I had mentioned. With his acquaintance I got introduced to a new world of fiction. But I didn't quite understand that world.

With an incident in our village, the characters, situations and the forces behind them found in the story stood in front of me.

One day, in our village the *madiga* hamlet alone caught fire. I came to know that the farmers in the village, all the men, were absconding. I was apprehensive that my household too would get caught in the trouble. So I took leave and left for my village.

I saw the devastated *madiga* homes. Cattle enclosures were like the scattered cattle, broken walls of the enclosures like mud tombs, earthen pots used in the *madiga* homes looked like the chips of mud pots used in crematorium. Only the sentries at the crematorium can envisage how horrible it can be when homes are burnt.

The very day I returned from home I met Jayachandra. We sat down at the usual place in the park. I got used to telling Jayachandra whenever something troubled me. I couldn't but tell him about my village.

"Can you think of wages of one rupee anywhere? That's the reason for the entire problem. The farmers say that the *madigas* should work for the age-old wages of a rupee a day. With the cost of living at present they say it's not enough and asked for a hike. The farmers' response to their demand is so ridiculous that I don't know what to say. The farmers say that these drunkards do not deserve more. Whatever be the wages, they never save. They have learnt to be arrogant after Independence as there's nobody to break their bones to punish them. When we are already burdened with the increase in the cost of agriculture these people ask for a hike. One bag of urea is hundred and twenty rupees even in the black-market. On top of it we've other expenses. If we hike wages the farmers have to go bankrupt."

'It's true' I was irritated with Jayachandra's response.

"What truth indeed! Labourers don't drink out of arrogance, we do."

Jayachandra seemed to get scared of my temper and said softly, "That's not what I mean. What the farmers say about the farm yield is true."

To convince him I said, "What you say may be true of the poorest of the poor farmers. They cannot afford to employ farm-hands. I'm speaking about those who have hundreds of acres of land, and mills. They don't depend on agriculture alone; anything is alright for them. They loot in broad daylight. Can you believe that even now they get service for free? You may not believe this. In the morning one has to clean the cattle yard of all the dung, and the fodder. Then, till two in the afternoon they work in the fields, the rest of the time they are engaged either in pounding or winnowing till it's time to make beds for the masters. It's about twelve hours of slogging, almost for free. There's no discrimination between women, men and children. For the rupee the masters give, even the beasts may refuse to slog."

"Besides the wages, they do give them food thrice a day...."

"The food they give the *madigas* is not like the one they serve their sons-in-law, dear sir!"

Jayachandra understood my sarcasm. He said quietly, "Yes, asking for a hike is justified... but to support everything they do is not really fair."

"What's it that doesn't deserve support?" I asked him.

"I mean, things like when the farmers are away, visiting their homes and abusing their women folk. Besides, the communists support them whatever they do."

"It's a lie! In one or two cases it might have happened as you said. You can't be patient when you're hungry. Moreover, they are uneducated fellows. Don't we grudge the Brahmins still, that they were unjust to us long ago? What do you say to that? They are trying to snatch away the barren land they are cultivating. Speaking about the communists, one must think over why they support these fellows."

Surprised, Jayachandra stared at me. I said whatever came to my mind.

"It would be nice if you write a story on this. Justice is on harijans' side. Whoever be it that torched their houses, it was the Peddareddys that got it done. It's they who snatched away their livelihood. This injustice must find its narrative in the story. Write. You can write about it."

"Very well. Another story going round is – however angry they might be they should not have committed such atrocities, so, as the farmers can't do without them, the harijans have torched their own houses..."

I lost my patience. I couldn't contain myself any longer.

"That's not what people say. That's what the farmers spread. A couple of their newspapers have published it. They are *Peddareddys.* You have the same blood in you. You can't see the truth. Believe me or go to the village and ask the farm-hands. It was my brother who torched those houses. He didn't do it because he owned a couple of acres. The bigger farmers took advantage of our poverty- in return they paid money and promised him the barren land of the harijans."

I did not weep in front of Jayachandra.

Jayachandra did not speak a word.

Piercing our silence and the music of radio in the park we heard some slogan- shouting. We came on to the road. It was in protest of the incident in our village. A demonstration by the young and the old, children, men and women. There were not many people. Ignoring the people on both sides of the road, who watched it as if it was an entertainment, these people moved ahead with determination and discipline.

I felt something stir in my bloodstream. I turned to talk to Jayachandra. I didn't find him beside me. I saw the writer Jayachandra amidst the people.

What has happened to me, the reader? Should I keep standing by the roadside?

Sympathy

I know what difficulties mean and how cruel they could be, my family too knows it. Those who own property know it, so do those who lose it. What do those who are jealous know?

We had two hundred acres of land when I was young. We had farms, land and houses in a few villages. This was known to all the neighbouring villages around us. My *jeji* used to tell me, we had about half a mond of gold in the house! People used to say that we had a lot of money and that even in those days we always had about two or three lakhs of ready cash in the house. In fact the job of looking after the village was ours, my *abba's.* The increasing wealth and image made Fate jealous for once. As far as I could remember my family fell into bad times for the first time.

Every year my village had the *devara* and in the *devara* we had the first share. But that year I don't know what evil befell and Chenchi Reddy, another wealthy farmer claimed the first share for his family. My *abba* was not the one to be taken as one wearing bangles. There started the faction in the village. My *abba* got four murders committed, went up to the Supreme Court and won all the four murder cases. But we were unlucky. At last he was killed by the *vadde* caste fellows of the Chenchi Reddy party. Even after his death people did not forget him. He was remembered as a man who stood by his word. We rose in the eyes of the people. But by the time he died we were left with only a hundred acres of land. Of course there were people who said that the rest of the property was not exactly spent on the party. My *jeji* used to tell me that all the gold was squandered on

abba's extravagance. On the whole it was not a small thing to lose both *abba* as well as the property.

It was inevitable for my father to take up my *abba's* murder case. He could send Chenchi Reddy's sons to the prison and proved himself his father's son. For a while we didn't face any problem. My brother and me concentrated on our studies. We went to the town and I was comfortable in the first form and my brother in his fourth form. It was during those days that my father had to join a village party. It was a party formed by relatives.

Our relative Papi Reddy and we had fields next to each other. There was no bund between them. Papi Reddy's farmhand brought in some trouble. As he was working on the field he encroached upon our field. How could our farmhand take it lying down? He beat him up black and blue there, in the field. There started the war of *Kurukshetra* between us and our relatives. The matter of undivided family's lands, farms and fallow lands came up for dispute. Property disputes are not simple to understand. They are deadly. Our relatives framed my father in some murder case. They murdered their own man and framed my father. They saw to it that he was sent away to a far away place. We were very young and couldn't withstand the bad times.

My studies were not affected. But my brother's studies came to a standstill in the fifth form. The responsibility of the entire family fell on his shoulders. As there was nobody to take care and as my mother was a very simple woman we didn't have much problem till recently. To please my brother I was preparing to become a Dy. S.P. That year I planned to complete my M.A. degree.

But it seems we were born to face evil times. Of late we had fallen into bad times. Like King Nala who was possessed by Kali, we had been troubled by the *madigas.* They might be farming the land by the village lake for about a couple of decades. But when the land belonged to us it was only just that they hand it over to us when my brother demanded it.

But why would they listen to him, the cunning and arrogant people that they were. Their response was, "What were you doing all these years? Now that the land is fertile you have come to us spreading out your loin cloths, with the false papers claiming the land. We won't give up the land, come what may".

If they could be so arrogant, how much more arrogant should the rich be. All the rich farmers wanted to teach the riff-raff a lesson. Though he was reluctant, my brother was made the leader of the party.

Now passions were on fire in the village. On the one side were the *madigas* and on the other were the rich farmers.

Nobody knew what would happen. The poor would never get anything from any party. Those who support them might do some harm to me. So my brother asked me not to come in the vicinity of the village. I didn't know when my family would get out of the clutches of these evil-doers.

I was foolish to mention this to my class-mate Ramakrishna after narrating the entire story of my family. I expected him to sympathise with me for facing so many problems in life. But what he said was, "The story of your family would be good enough for a Telugu cinema. They are tear-jerkers fit enough to fill the coffers of the producers. No one in the right senses would sympathise with the likes of you. Your problems are self-inflicted. The real problems are those faced by the Harijans of your village. People like you and the rich land-owners are responsible for their plight. Those who don't have property deserve sympathy, not you."

The *madigas* of my village who had rebelled against us to retain their property were better than this fellow! Why should I care for his love and sympathy? Why should I bother about such crazy and cruel people who deprive others of their property?

Back and Forth

"Aren't the people of this place good at heart?! It's a surprise that they commit murders with such ease. Why is it that this region has such a criminal psychology?"

Krishna Rao, the engineer at the Irrigation and Public Works Division who had newly been transferred to Cuddapah expressed his surprise casually.

"It's because they don't know how to backstab people like you. We only know how to act in public like men of mettle. How do those who dilly dally with civil cases understand such things?" Venkata Reddy thundered.

Krishna Rao got scared. He put down the whiskey glass he was about to sip from and kept the pieces of meat he picked up back into the plate.

He didn't mean respectable people like Venkata Reddy but only those who were seasoned murderers, that too because the topic of the day light murder in Pulivendula was brought up. It was only a casual remark. He spoke out because he knew everybody around in the party. Though Basi Reddy was just an acquaintance he worked with him as a contractor. Venkata Reddy and Madhava were his class fellows and room mates for a couple of years. He spoke out because he was close to them. At that Venkata Reddy spoke roughly. Basi Reddy didn't mind much but Venkata Reddy had a rough tongue. He hadn't changed at all in all these ten, twelve years.

As Krishna Reddy was bracing himself up to retort Venkata Reddy, Madhava interfered with a smile.

"Orey, as electrocuting is better than hanging, it is more civilized to backstab than to cut each other's throat. Civil cases may prolong, but at least men are left alive. In criminal cases even that is not possible. You are a confounded junior criminal lawyer, what do you know about civil cases?"

With Madhava's words Venkata Reddy was all the more provoked to start abusing. "Yes, what do I know of the civilization of greed and avarice. I am a son of Regadigadda soil. We don't have cheap prostitutes and bastards who don't hesitate to pawn even their mothers for money, to learn from them."

Krishna Reddy's anger was getting stoked. Moreover, to control himself he had emptied the glass of whiskey.

Madhava provoked Venkata Reddy with his retort.

"Don't be in a hurry. Don't you think we have some cheap women ready to sleep with you for a *dammidi* here? Whenever you get drunk you crave for a woman. Do you get them every day from Kakinada? Don't you think the days are close when we too need to pawn our siblings and mothers? Wait for the Tungabhadhra to flow on the black soil and wait for a couple of factories to start – you'll understand how we lead such false lives, and how our lives revolve round money. It's the same, back and forth!"

Venkata Reddy was choking. He didn't know what to say and emptied the bottle into the glass and drank it off straight without soda. Krishna Rao wanted to divert the topic and said with a forced smile, "Venkata Reddy hasn't changed at all. He hasn't changed much since the days when we were studying at Loyola."

Madhava burst into laughter and said, "Do you expect Venkata Reddy to change? He abused the Telengana people during the movement for a separate state for Andhra Pradesh. He has no love lost for any region. He should only get an opportunity and he would demand a separate state for

Cuddapah. As those politicians who are not in the Cabinet are dangerous, the likes of him, lawyers who have no work are equally a threat to the nation.

"Such a threat is but temporary. It's always people like you who pose a real danger."

"Let the real danger come and people like you with indecent upbringing will be wiped out." Madhava said emotionally.

"Please let us stop this discussion. It's better to talk something pleasant now." Krishna Rao warned.

Basi Reddy, who hadn't taken part in the discussion but was carefully filling Krishna Rao's glass with whiskey, supported him. He had his own fears, he was afraid that all his money and effort would go waste.

"That's what I think too. Parties shouldn't encourage people to fight like dogs. This fellow Venkata Reddy's head spins the moment he smells liquor. Please don't mind it. He has no work in the court; besides, he has now got involved in the village politics and has lost his head. I've been nagging him to get into the contract business like me and be my partner. But he is not willing. You have come here as E.E. Let's see if he changes his mind now. Well, one full bottle is still left. The stuff is good and special. Here, Venkata Reddy, don't drink too much. Once you get drunk you forget yourself."

"This Basi Reddy here won't forget himself however drunk he gets, nor does he forget what he wants." Madhava said with venom.

'This Madhava here, he is the type who has read books and is spoilt, *saar*. I don't know how you got along with them when you were a student, but this Venkata Reddy has a pungent tongue and Madhava always keeps provoking people."

Krishna Rao laughed at Basi Reddy's words. He felt irked when he addressed him using the singular form of 'you'. But on coming here he understood that in Cuddapah people address one another without using honorific. He said with a smile, "This is the job of writers. Have you been writing stories? I think you had sent me a book some time ago. I don't remember the title now."

Madhava just laughed in response. That's all. Basi Reddy remarked light heartedly. "We can't survive if we remember his stories, *saar*. He moves around with us and writes about us. He would have been beaten up long ago if he were not a friend."

Madhava's voice was full of hatred when he said, "Why don't you also say that 'the fellow belongs to the upper caste and no son of a donkey in this country would turn a new leaf reading his worthless stories, so we didn't care much'"

"Well said" Krishna Rao said tongue-in-cheek.

Basi Reddy got into the discussion now. "We'll be saved if they don't, *saar*. We can never bring about any change in this fellow Madhava. Venkata Reddy is much better. We have to make him less arrogant. Otherwise he'll be in trouble, won't be worth a small coin. In fact it is for him that I have submitted the Dongalavaagu tender. Please advise him. All that he does is to either roam about in his black coat, get involved in the village politics or play rummy at the united club.. Shouldn't he be earning now so that it stands by him in later life? These are not days when you can depend on land alone."

"Yes, it's true." Krishna Rao agreed with him.

He remembered how his family was struggling to escape the effect of the Land Reforms.

Venkata Reddy said softly, "Everyone wants to earn money. But shouldn't they get a chance? I mean, not everyone gets a moneyed father-in-law like you could."

"Why do you need fathers-in-law? What's wrong with you? You brought your problems because of politics. But you do have a hundred acre land and have friends who'll do anything for you." Pointing at Krishna Rao, Basi Reddy said rather cunningly. Krishna Rao stretched out the empty glass. Basi Reddy filled it with whiskey, soda and ice.

"If only this blessed case is over..." Venkata Reddy groaned.

"What's the case?" Krishna Rao was inquisitive.

"It's the usual worthless murder case" Basi Reddy answered. Krishna Rao hesitated to ask further. Basi Reddy offered the details. "Do you think he got somebody murdered? No. Poor fellow, his brother got murdered...land disputes."

Krishna Reddy looked at Venkata Reddy with sympathy. Venkata Reddy looked sad. Basi Reddy continued. "Losing his brother was indeed sad, *saar*. But where is the end to this vengeance? It should be stopped somewhere. The problem is with people who provoke others. There's a saying, 'it's not the person who pushes the cock into the arena but it is the spectator who cheers the fight shows more enthusiasm'. People don't let the political leader alone. With his brother's death he has become the sole caretaker of his family as well as his group. Both his people at home and the village want him to get back to the village and lead the party. We discourage him. The murder case is on. Meanwhile some good has happened. The opposition wants a compromise. They are also people who matter...."

"They have offered one lakh rupees," Madhava murmured.

"Yes, whatever happened has happened. But Venkata Reddy wants revenge. Where's the end to this?" asked Basi Reddy.

"Do you think I am a nincompoop to let the bastards go free?" Venkata Reddy was overcome by emotion.

"If you don't, you'll end up either in a jail or in the cemetery" Madhava said unemotionally.

"I think we should agree with Basi Reddy. Why bother, let's take care of the Dongalavagu. We may forget everything when we get into work." Krishna Reddy said looking at Venkata Reddy and Basi Reddy with caution.

"You are right, *saar.* The other party is my relatives. I've arranged witnesses for this fellow. No problem with the police. If only you put in a word to Judge Koreswara Rao...." Basi Reddy suggested furtively.

'He's a close relative, a little crazy, but let's try and find some way."

Krishna Rao thought that it was not appropriate to discuss it in the presence of Madhava and looked at him suggestively. Madhava understood it. He became the odd man out. His personality never allowed him to get on with this world. Nor could he be away from it. "Both Venkata Reddy and you are E.E's friends. If the E.E interferes Venkata Reddy would agree. Invite him for the party, I'll bear the expenses. Let's do it for the sake of friendship" said Basi Reddy. That's how it happened.

Madhava detested himself. He hated the other three, and became enraged. He remarked cruelly. "Now that all the work is over, tell me, you champion of Cuddapah, you son of the black soil, hero, Venkata Reddy! Why has this Basi Reddy come forward to organize this party? Is it for the sake of our twelve-year-old friendship alone? Why have you joined us? Is it for the sake of your village? Why have I come here? Is it to write stories? Answer me. Once you attempt an answer all our proud civilization will get exposed. Speak out!"

Venkata Reddy got wild. He started abusing and got up to hit him. He shouted, "Get out!"

"Mr. Madhav, please leave" Krishna Rao suggested.

"Leave" Basi Reddy chided.

Madhav left in anger, hatred and self-pity.

'A jealous fellow. All these days I thought that poets and prostitutes were fun in a party. He has spoilt the whole atmosphere." Krishna Rao talked ill of Madhav in a civil manner.

All three of them concentrated on their drinks.

Basi Reddy's drunken eyes dreamt of Dongalavagu contract, and Venkata Reddy was dreaming about the money he could make because of the compromise arrived at.

Krishna Rao's stoned brain was counting the commission money he would get from the Dongalavagu contract and Venkata Reddy's case.

Venkata Reddy's ears were filled with noises; his murdered brother, money from the compromise, the tinkle of coins, cries of his mother and brother's wife... his nerves started aching for the woman Basi Reddy arranged for them... the woman who agreed to sleep with them for money... amidst all these the disturbing sphinx-like questions of Madhava ... dangerous feelings...

Survival

"Here, Kamakshamma, why have you come to the Brahmin temple of Rama? Why didn't you go to the Komati Ammavaru temple?" *Acharlu* asked her, chanting the *ashtottharam,* and dropping a couple of flowers into her hands.

Kamakshamma was shocked at the priest's words. 'What has happened to Krishnamachari? Why is he talking to her as if she's not a Brahmin and refers to the temple as *Brahmin Ramalayam* ?' She was confused in her response.

"How does it matter which temple it is, *Acharlu,* what matters is devotion. You are a priest, how can you talk like this? You certainly know best...all of us are live in this Brahmin settlement and have been visiting this temple right from the beginning...we are devoted to this god."

"That's exactly what I'm pointing out. You should be sincere to what you've been doing. You should advice Sastri. He is a respected pundit in this town, a poet, he has made a name that he has very good knowledge of Bhagavadgita..." *Acharlu* would have come out with all the venom in his heart, but couldn't as he was in the temple. As a couple of people arrived he got busy with the rituals of the *archana.*

Kamakshamma couldn't stand there long. She walked out of the temple. She circumambulated the temple rather absent-mindedly. Then she sat under the canopy. But she was disturbed. She came there to pray to Lord SitaRama to salvage her troubled family, to save her sister's family from bad times that have befallen on them, but she was wounded by the priest's words.

Acharlu wasn't a sharp-tongued person. He was a good man. But he was harsh with her, like a dog with a piece of wood in the mouth. It was rather strange. In fact *Acharlu* was respectful towards her husband. Whenever he got time he used to come home, sit for hours discussing poetry and *puranams* with her husband. Why did he spit such venom now? *Acharlu* was fond of her. Sometimes if she couldn't take coconuts to offer to the god, he used to place pieces of coconut and some flowers from the temple in her basket. He would affectionately insist that she take them. But what made him rough-talk to her today? Did her husband do something wrong? Otherwise why would *Acharlu* be so disrespectful...asking her to give him a piece of her mind...he didn't even respect his age...'

Kamakshamma's mind wandered.

She was away for a month. She was with her sister, sharing her problems. Something must have happened here during that time. What could it be? That headstrong man must have done some wrong. He always moved about with the *sudras,* so he must have done some wrong...perhaps he had done something like her sister's husband....oh no, oh no...but how can you be sure of these men?... shouldn't age mellow their thoughts...

Kamakshamma was trying hard to bring such thoughts to an end. "*Osev* Kamakshi!' her heart almost missed a beat at the call.

It was Seshamma...Seshamma who always came to the temple to listen to the chanting of Gita....She had a rough tongue...She had all the gossip at the hem of her sari...

As if someone was chasing her, Kamakshamma hurried home.

Even at home Kamakshamma was troubled by *Acharlu's* words at the temple. To divert herself from her thoughts she started cooking. She took out from the bag the white gourd

her sister gave her that morning and started cutting it. She remembered her sister and her children and felt sad.

They thought that among all the five sisters the last one was the luckiest. The other four of them got settled in villages. They were happy that the youngest sister's husband had some property, but he was wayward and squandered all the property and died. He left them destitutes as if he wanted to say that *vaidikas* should live a life of beggars and therefore they too should live on charity. What's the use of his being born a brahmin when he always behaved like a *sudra*. He could escape, but what about her sister and the children? How would they manage...

How better was her own life? For the past ten years there had been nothing to look forward to in life. There were those three daughters old enough to get married, they are a burden like a stove of live coal on one's chest. Then there were two sons who never could learn even a couple of letters of the alphabet, useless fellows! And there was this husband of hers who had retired from service and never bothered about the problems of life. He could never save a paisa in his entire career as a teacher. He wrote bundles and bundles of poetry, wasting paper. Wherever you turned there were those papers, in every corner, like rags. Sometimes he got some shawls; fit enough to be used as mops. A job which wasn't enough to fetch a square meal a day, useless poetry, bundles of knowledge. Till he took up the recitation of Gita at the temple a couple of months ago it was always a problem to make ends meet. They said he would get pension but he hadn't got it yet. Or perhaps he was squandering it away...these men could do anything on the sly keeping their woman in the dark...like her sister's husband was doing...He must have done something wrong... otherwise why would Acharlu ask her to give him a piece of her mind. He was decent enough not to give her the details. If she had met Seshamma she would have exposed him... would her life also end up like her sister's.... Would she end up in the streets?

Kamakshamma shuddered at the thought.

She somehow managed to complete the cooking. Krishnamacharlu's hurting words, their life full of problems, her sister's family ending up in the streets, all these swarmed her mind like termites. Travel fatigued, tired with the house chores, her mind troubled, she curled herself in a corner and fell asleep.

"Here... you...you're sleeping with the door wide open...may be you'll nag me and ask me what I've got here at home that the thief would take away. There are these bundles of poems I've been writing for the past thirty years. Who knows, the world may appreciate it after my death....by the way, where are the children, you have been sleeping such a sound sleep? Why are you staring at me like one possessed? Are you..."

Deft in getting on with life, in his own light-hearted way Sastri rattled away.

Feeling insulted, angry, and heavy in heart, Kamakshama couldn't speak a word.

Sastri thought she was feeling dejected with thoughts of her sister's plight. He lighted a beedi and said soothingly: "Why do you always think of your sister and feel sad? Are we in a position to look after them? Our plight is still worse."

"How can we be better off, if we have crooked minds?"

"Crooked minds? What are you talking about? Are you giving a certificate? I smoke beedis and write poetry knowing fully well that in this age it is not very fetching, when the children are not around I tease you playfully- are these crookedness?"

Sastri's banter enraged Kamakshamma. She couldn't control herself. She was overcome with grief and spoke even as her voice choked. "Today in the temple I felt very insulted. It was lucky that nobody was around. That

Krishnamacharlu is younger to you in age. When I recall what he said about you I shudder."

"What did he say?"

"He asked me to give you a piece of my mind!"

"Did he? What does he think we're doing now ...anyway...but *Acharlu* doesn't normally speak so..."

"How do I know ...I have been away for a month. For a month I had to bear the plight of my wretched sister and now that I am back I face another kind of torture... If you haven't done anything why would he be so disrespectful?"

"Me, doing wrong? Tell me, in what context did he make the remark."

"Oh, there was no great context. The moment I stepped into the temple he asked me why I went to the Brahmin Ramalayam and that I should have gone to the Komati Ammavaru temple."

"Enough. I now understand what it is. *Ori Acharlu*..." Sastri burst into laughter.

"You laugh at everything" Kamakshamma was irritated.

"Brahmin Ramalayam...crazy...Komati Ammavaru temple...foolishness...In this race of making ends meet, this division of caste based gods... His problem was not what he said it was. He thought I was snatching away his right. He spat out his anger."

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, won't he be angry if he lost in the survival race? In the Ammavaru temple *Acharlu's* father Seshacharlu was chanting *puranam* all these days, wasn't he? Now the Komati caste people asked him stop it and in his place asked me to recite Gita. The entire problem cropped up because the Komati people changed their allegiance to *karmayoga* from *bhaktiyoga*.

"But what happens to your commitment to Ramalayam to recite Gita there...."

"Am I Lord Krishna to be in two places at the same time? They pay me five rupees in Ramalayam and in the Ammavaru temple they pay ten. After my retirement our expenses have been increasing day by day. I thought Komati temple payment of ten rupees is more important for us than the Brahmin Ramalayam. So I agreed to work for Komati temple and discontinued to work for Ramalayam. In the process Krishnamacharlu's family has lost the income of five rupees a day and we have gained five. That's the reason Acharlu was angry, because he has lost to me. It's a matter of survival."

"Oh, I imagined so many things and abused you *chi, chi.* So, that's the reason for *Acharlu's* belligerence. Lowly fellow, all these days he depended on those very same Komatis and now he points his finger at us! Teaching us the morals. I thought he was a good fellow, but he has a crooked mind."

"Thoughts change depending on our necessities. In a couple of days if some other mendicant comes into the town and offers to perform Chaturmasa Vratam we'll have to bite the dust. Then would we have pleasant thoughts?" Sastri's words were gentle and thoughtful.

"Please don't speak of the unmentionable, I get scared." Kamakshamma looked frightened.

"Are our lives any the better" Sastri threw away the butt of the beedi as he spoke out.

Sastri's words made their lives look all the more shaky, unworthy and dreadful to Kamakshamma.

The Face of Love

I had been struggling for the past one week. I was not able to write a story depicting noble love. I had not been able to get a wonderful theme of ideal sacrifice.

I felt that perhaps of late my heart had become blunt. In fact I'd been pestering all and sundry with my intriguing questions in the hope of getting raw material for the story I was going to write. Leave alone any raw material; there was this nuisance in the next room hindering the flow of my thoughts and my writing.

The landlord had no sense. He lets out the room next to mine either to some patients or to the murder accused village parties making rounds to the courts. While the patients were confined to the hospitals, those who came to look after them got confined to this room to torture me. While the murder accused got jailed their people gathered in this room to grill and eat me alive.

Can there be a greater torture for creative writing than lack of privacy?

In the morning some patients arrived in the room. There was a lot of commotion. It was quiet now.

Then it started, the folk song in the veranda. As if all the innumerable fears, apprehensions, and anxieties that I had about life were not enough, now this folk song! I felt like strangulating the woman singing the folk song. It would be good for me, I would be hanged until death. Hanging until death is a cure for all diseases. But where was the need to be specially convicted? Wasn't what I was going through enough?

Somehow after a while I felt that the rendering of the song seemed all right. It seemed to be a beloved's heart-rending song of separation. I wanted to see the singer. She must be a young, beautiful widow. If I didn't have that kind of confidence I wouldn't be writing stories.

I walked to the veranda.

She was an old woman in a faded sari singing while she was cleaning rice with the winnow. Ordinary looks in an ordinary dress. If only she had the *bottu* on her forehead she would have looked like my mother. She was of the same age as my dead mother. I was shocked. My sixth sense mocked at me.

When she saw me the old woman stopped singing and spoke to me. "So my son, it is you who is in the next room?"

I smiled wryly in response.

"Come, sit on that string cot *nayana*." She said.

I sat down. The old woman continued with her cleaning of rice.

Could there be a wonderful love episode in her life? Who knows? Anything was possible. Perhaps I would get a subject for my story. I drew her into conversation. "How do you feel singing the song, *avva*?" I asked her. "What's so special, *nayana*. Just a casual song." She said as she continued to separate small stones from the rice.

Clever. She was bluffing that it was a casual song. If it were a casual song how could it stir my feelings so? As a journalist I prepared myself with the relevant questions.

"Who was the old man they were taking to the hospital in the morning? Was he your relative?" I asked.

"If you believe that everyone is related to you. Aren't you related to me?" She answered me with another question. "They said they were going to the hospital and asked me if I could cook for them and I came along."

"Why you? Doesn't he have any other woman in the family?" I confronted her with another question.

"It's the harvest season. As for me, I've got nothing else to do."

"Don't you have anybody?"

"Mine is a wasted life, *nayana*!" she said.

She kept quiet for a while as she washed the rice. Hers must surely be a unique life, I thought. Before I asked her another question she said dispassionately, "I had a family once." Keeping the pot of rice on the stove she concluded, "I had children too." I waited for her to go on. She shoved some firewood into the stove and kept looking at them.

I had to ask her, "What happened to all of them?"

She was about to respond and a man in poplin shirt, mull dhoti and upper cloth came in and asked the old woman:

"Well, Achchamma, hasn't the rice been cooked yet? O.k., I'll get some mutton, cook for me. It's long since I've eaten the food you've cooked. Moreover, if I keep running around the hospitals at this rate, it's not the patients but it would be me who would go to the grave yard."

The old woman smiled and replied," Let others be. You eat and roam around like a fox. As long as there are people making trips to the courts and hospitals you won't die. Make it fast if you're getting mutton."

"You stay in the next room, don't you? I saw you in the morning lost in thought, counting the beams on the roof. Don't you have any job?" he asked me. I smiled in response.

"He is not cunning like you. He's simple like a child." Achchamma chided the man in poplin shirt.

"If I were so cunning why would I lose you and get into the clutches of Subbulu? Well, let me get some mutton." With that, fearing Achchamma's retort.the poplin shirt ran away.

Achchamma had a secret love in life. I wanted to know what it was.

"Who's he, *avva*?" I asked her.

"Everyone in our village calls him *poplin Eerraddi,"* she laughed.

After that I didn't know what to say and how to say it. Poplin Veerareddy said 'why would I lose you'. Perhaps she was a cook at his place. Still I was not sure. I hesitated as I asked, "Is he your relative, *avva*?"

"I lived with Eerreddi for some time." She said.

My decency stopped me from asking her as to why she has adopted widowhood. "But you talked about children and so on." I asked her suggestively.

"Oh, that? It is a spent story, a story of marriage arranged by elders in the family."She paused.

"A marriage forced on you?"

"How would I know all that, *nayana*? Elders fixed it. I lived with him. He was a good man. If only this Eerreddi hadn't got him into drinking he would have lived for some more time. Eerreddi got him into the habit of drinking the very first thing in the morning."

"Why?" I asked.

"So that he too could drink." Achchamma laughed like a child.

"Then what happened?"

"Well, he drank so much that he got ulcer in his stomach and died in this very hospital. We lost almost three forth of the property to drinks and diseases. The only daughter I had, I got her married when she came of age. This Eerrddi said it was a good proposal. Within three months of marriage the boy died of some unknown disease. With all this I lost

whatever was left of the property. Then I struggled hard and got my daughter married again. I couldn't go and stay with my daughter as a destitute. I chose to stay with this Eerreddi."

Achchamma narrated her story without a trace of sorrow in her voice. I was surprised at her stoicism. I felt angry and repulsed by the thought of her living with the Poplin Veerareddy.

"How did you depend on the deceitful Veerareddy so much?" I asked her.

"Who should I have believed, *nayana*? As the cloth is, so is the quilt.' Said the old woman looking at me.

"You married twice, so did your daughter," I said with resentment.

"Twice married, my foot. We have the custom of getting married twice but it's not so with the *Kapus*. Our village is a big wretched dilapidated house. They chase a destitute woman like dogs. To avoid that, I took shelter with this Erreddi. Isn't it better with one person, son?" she posed a counter question.

"Later Veerareddy deserted you, did he?" I asked.

"Yes, he got the liquor seller Subbulu's company. I can only be a cook. I can be only a liability. He has been living with her for the last ten years. He's doing well. I've been living alone since then. If people call me to help them in weddings I go. If people making trips to the hospital ask me I accompany them. In other times I work as domestic help and somehow manage my life." She answered.

"Didn't you think Veerareddy ditched you, *avva*?" I asked.

"Each unto his nature. Everyone is concerned about his own well-being." She philosophised.

I clenched my teeth and asked my last question. "Did you like your first husband more or did you love this Veerareddy more?"

"I don't know that, son. Elders fixed my first marriage. The second came in handy in my destitution. All this is to get me some food, clothes and protection of a male. What do we do with things like love? We can't eat love, can we? I have a lot of cooking to do. I've to cook mutton." The old woman started her folk song as she went into the room. I felt dizzy.

After a few days I wrote Achchamma's love story as it happened. My long-standing fan started abusing me. "Are you crazy that you have written such a useless story? What love could you perceive in the immoral Achchamma? What's so special about her?" She wrote a letter of four pages in the same tone.

"What's so special in all your love life? What's special in love and in married life? Achchamma *avva's* life is better than ours. She has understood the insecurity in her life. She has understood the principles governing love. Have we?"Enraged,I wrote back to my fan.

My fan stopped writing to me. In the readers' column she abused the story as immoral. Her letter provoked half a dozen others to write in the same vein. But as for me, I felt happy that I didn't become 'Pavlov's dog' in acknowledging the true face of love in life and in writing love stories.

Our Love Stories

Like many people my wife Shoba is very much interested in love stories. At that, she loves stories full of great love, sacrifices, and tears, which an ordinary person like me can't even imagine, and which find place in popular writer Sugumanchi Rachana Devi's novels and stories.

I write once in a blue moon. Then before sending it for publication I ask her to read it. She reads it because she's the first reader of my writings. She reads it because I ask her for her opinion. That's ok. But that doesn't mean that she should take advantage of being my wife and attack my likes and dislikes and my opinions which I value very much.

"Why should you write such serious stories? Do you think you can change the world with your stories? You're crazy. Of course the story is ok. But why do you have such impatience with the world? If you write like Rachana Devi, do you think your idealism will be destroyed? Whatever you write it should have an appeal." This, in short, has been her attack on me.

I ask her if my story is readable.

"Of course it is readable. Whatever you write, however you write it, people like me would have to read it to kill time. Why can't you write like Rachana Devi..."she would comment.

This famous writer Rachana Devi stopped torturing me through my wife Shoba and attacked me directly one day.

That evening as I was walking to my house I noticed Rachana's car parked in the lane near my house. It's the car

which I saw on three or four occasions at writers' conferences, no doubt, it was Rachana's. As I walked into my house I wondered who could be her friends in this Vithalvadi.

Rachana was in my house.

Shoba and Rachana were engaged in close conversation. Our daughter Kiranmayi was sitting in her lap playing with her pearl necklace while son Sricharan was sitting close to his mother keenly watching her lips mouthing words very fast. They didn't notice me. I coughed softly. My wife got up on seeing me. As she stood up a couple of books fell down. I picked them up. They were all written by Rachana, complementary copies she had given to my wife.

I remarked light-heartedly. "We have known each other for so long, moreover though I'm not so good at writing as you are I too have tried my hands at writing, but you never gave me copies of your books. Now you are partial to your fellow women."

My wife retorted. "What's the use of giving them to you? As the crude saying goes, it's like giving mogra flowers to those hands that shred them. You don't appreciate these things."

I felt like laughing. "Who said that" I asked looking at Rachana.

Rachana smiled in embarrassment: "Time for me to leave" she stood up to go.

"What's the hurry? Have I interrupted you?" I asked.

Shoba insisted that she stayed for dinner.

"My director and me have to see the Minister in another hour. I'll come some other time. Visit me tomorrow. I'll send my car to pick you up."

I wanted to say that we didn't need her car and that we

could always take a rickshaw or a bus if we wanted to visit her. But I didn't say a word.

Rachana left.

That night I slept on the terrace of our one-room apartment. It was pitch dark. There were some occasional stars in the sky. Inside the room after putting the children to bed Shoba got immersed in a novel. Outside the room in the dark, there I was, immersed in my thoughts.

It was strange that Rachana visited us. I used to meet her at the writers' conference. I remember to have told her once that Shoba is her fan, perhaps I had mentioned where we live. But why did she visit us? I couldn't fathom her intention.

Some time in the middle of the night Shoba came to bed and said with all admiration. "How well she has written 'Thyagamayi'. No wonder the magazine gave her the first prize of five thousand rupees. My heart was so touched when I read through it."

"I see"

"Oh, to think of Madhurima's sacrifice...such great sacrifice...She lived alone all by herself when she was ditched by her lover. Sarath loved her but ditched her, comfortably married someone else. All men are alike. You play with women's hearts."

"We have nothing else to do."

'To think of Madhurima's life...."

"In the novel?"

"Of course in the novel, don't you think such things happen in life?"

"No, unless you have plenty of money and leisure to indulge in living well, crying and do sacrifices."

"You are rather strange. You link up everything with money, as if love is never above riches."

I did not respond. Shoba remembered something more and remarked, "When I think of Sarath's character I think of you. As if she has moulded the character after you."

"I haven't read that novel."

"I don't believe. You must have. Ok, there could be people who are alike. Why don't you write something like this? She appreciated your writings. She said that if only you give up politics and concentrate on your writing, you could write really well. What's wrong in writing on the lines of the needs of the magazines? You'll earn money as well as a name...she looked so simple, and the pearl necklace she was wearing was so lovely!"

I felt that Shoba was pointing out my inability to earn through my writing and was irritated. "Good, you didn't say her car was nice."

"I'm not that greedy. I just thought that you could write some good novels and could fetch some additional income..."

"She and people like her are writing enough of such stuff, aren't they? Why should I write them, moreover, at my age....?" I said in jest.

"What's your age? You're only thirty-five. She's also your age. She also belongs to our community; she said she studied with you."

"Perhaps"

Shoba jibed, "How impersonal you are! In this vast city of Hyderabad you don't bother about our own people. She's a renowned writer. She is in a good job, she is not arrogant. She felt very happy when I told her I've named our children after the characters in her novel. She asked me if you objected to it. Of course I told her that you never do."

"So, you have portrayed me as somebody with no individuality" I laughed.

Shoba didn't answer me. She was in her own world.

'By the way, I haven't asked you what I wanted to. Would you mind if I ask you...you must speak the truth." Shoba said rather gravely.

"Ok, I haven't kept anything from you.'

"After all you are a man. It seems there was a proposal to get both of you married..."

"Your people also considered many boys before they considered me as a candidate for marriage, didn't they"

"Every girl has to undergo the trouble"

"In this country there's no discrimination of gender when it comes to such trouble. Some have more and some a little less of it, that's all."

"You philosophize on everything. Ok, why didn't you marry Rachana?"

"Why don't you ask her?"

"How can I be so indecent?"

"Ok, why didn't you marry that engineer?"

"They are not comparable issues"

"They are"

"My father couldn't pay the dowry"

"My case also was similar"

"Did they ask a bride price?"

She laughed and asked me again, "You are a man; you can afford to do anything. Tell me, why did you not marry Rachana?"

I looked at the stars as I replied, "We didn't have property and I didn't have a job those days."

"Didn't they know it?"

"They knew it. But those days I had passed the Group I Services Test. They thought I would get the job. I didn't get the job. They backed out."

"Why didn't you get it?"

"I didn't have any god father" I said bitterly.

"Oh, I see...were you in love with Rachana...Tell me the truth."

"I don't know if I were in love with her but thought it would be nice to marry her."

"Was she in love with you?"

"I don't know. But later I came to know that she was not in love with anybody- except with herself and with money."

"She didn't seem to be "

"If she didn't, it's not my fault. Each one has different facets of personality."

"Ok, why didn't you tell me all these things? There must be some reason."

I didn't find any change in Shoba's voice. I wanted to understand her by looking at her eyes, but it was dark. I was shaken and said rather impatiently, "What did you want me to tell you? That it was my financial position and not me that prevented me from marrying someone? That I didn't regret when Rachana thought that I didn't deserve her and got married to a moneyed fellow who wasn't as good as me in any other respect? It was one of the thousand incidents that happen in people's lives. Things worse than this happen. She and me had the same education, but she is a deputy director

whereas I'm still a lower division clerk. You are also a woman like her. But you got an ordinary person for a husband whereas she got a husband who is a film producer who can buy a hundred men like me. They are moneyed people who can buy opportunities. That's all."

"Now I understand how Rachana could write such love stories and why you can't. Anyway, why should we bother about such things? It's enough for us if we get a square meal a day and some love in life."

Shoba clung to me like a lizard and said that, perhaps with sympathy, or contentment or confidence or perhaps with an anxiety that even this little happiness would be lost.

Stars shined dimly in that pitch black darkness.

The Custom

On the day of wedding dogs have a field day. On the day of elections, which animals have a field day, I wonder.

Already both parties belonging to two different castes were on the war path. While the staff and me had been anxiously waiting for the rising waves of the ocean to ebb, the small time Pleader Janardhan appeared on the scene.

He had the arrogance of the member of the college committee. He announced his arrival on phone. He would nag us about what's customary. A teacher's job is lowly in everybody's eyes. Everybody feels he is the boss when it comes to a privately run college.

The Principal was irritated. He could see from the window, the College Committee member Janardhana Reddy walking on the road laid between acacia trees on both sides. 'Now he would cling to the college like these thorny acacia,' he thought.

As Janardhana Reddy entered the room he reluctantly asked him to have a seat. Then he looked at Venkata Reddy who accompanied him, and said "Oh, you have come along with him!" He pretended to be looking into a file for a while and then said, "Well tell me ..."

Janardhana Reddy settled down in a chair opposite the principal, drew the ash-tray on the table towards himself, and lighted a cigarette. He blew out smoke and slowly began to talk. "What's customary must be followed. It's so right from the time we started the college in the town. The Committee Chairman is our man. The Correspondent is their man. Four of the Committee members belong to us

and the other four are their men. Of course when a Harijan was appointed as the D.E O of the district we included a Harijan as a member of the committee deviating from our custom. He is a crack pot. We can dismiss him whenever we want. Don't we have a procedure in the students' union? This time they wanted elections because they have become too big for their boots, and because they think that we have lost our footing in Hyderabad. See to it that the elections don't take place. Ask them to give the position of the college chairman to us. Let them take the position of the secretary. That would be in accordance with the custom.

Janardhana Reddy's discourse on 'custom' did not amuse the principal. He was enraged. Taking advantage of his silence, Janardhana Reddy continued with renewed vigour. 'Why don't you speak? Let alone the college committee and the student elections. Aren't we giving jobs on equal terms to both the parties, as per the custom? Of course there are a couple of non-descript people who belong to the low caste. In politics though you don't like it, you have to accept it. But if you say that we'll have elections for the chairman's post and for the secretary's post we won't behave as people wearing bangles and keep quiet. Janardhana Reddy adjusted the wrist- watch- chain which almost looked like a bangle.

Janardhana Reddy's words churned the insides of his stomach. 'our people!' As if he had been given membership in that caste ridden herd! As if he had joined them. If only he had retained the hot blood of ten years ago, he would have kicked this 'custom man' on his face! He was getting angry with himself, feeling hatred for himself. On the other hand the year-old position as the Principal and his desire to do some good for the college had smothered his dissatisfaction.

The Principal controlled himself and said gently, "It's unfortunate for the college that this year there's a faction on caste lines among the students. Whoever is responsible for

this, these agitations surely will spoil the students' future. I conveyed this to the Chairman and the Correspondent. I cautioned my staff also. Please don't mind my telling you this...it's easy to kindle the fire...."

Janardhana Reddy was angry. He said mockingly, "I know you didn't want the fire to be kindled, so you offered the student union vice president's position to Venkatarama Naidu."

The Principal retorted, "Yes, following whatever has been customary I offered the fine Arts Association Vice President position to Venku Reddy."

The Head of Economics faculty Venku Reddy who was listening to the conversation smiled enigmatically.

"Well, I have tried my best to make you see reason...That's my way...I made you the principal because you are our man.... It's up to you now...If it were someone from their side..." Janardhana Reddy got up and left. Venku Reddy followed him like his tail.

'Rascal! He says I got this because I'm his man, as if his love for his caste is overflowing, as if I'm an undeserving fellow without any qualification, as if he has crowned me superseding somebody's seniority! I know your vileness. The students don't know you. The fellow has become a political leader because of people like Venku Reddy in the faculty. If these kids are divided over some political idealism it would have been ok. But this generation has no idealism. Janardhana Reddys, Venku Reddys, Venkatarama Naidus are caste-dung-heaps and in these heaps are the students like maggots. This country has no salvation.

The Principal's mind was filled with dejection.

"*Saar*, some students want to see you." These words of the peon brought him back to this world.

"Ask them to come in."

About ten of them came in. He understood that they belonged to Abbayya Naidu's group. But he was surprised to see Prasad in that group. He didn't want to assume anything.

"Please sit down." He gestured to them.

Some of them sat down. From among those who were seated the one who looked like a hippie began first, "Elections... what do you propose to do with them?"

"Why don't you suggest what I should do?" Hippie didn't like the Principal's smile. He asked him to explain further. "Would they be indirect elections? Tell us now. Our group has decided who should be the class representatives. We have already started canvassing. Now have you decided direct elections?"

'If there was Emergency you would have even said we'd have merit nominations" The Principal didn't bother about the comment from another boy. He asked with a smile, "Who said we're going to have direct elections? What you want and what's there in the Constitution, is indirect elections...Whatever be it, why don't you come to a compromise?"

"Why should you be bothered sir, we'll manage it amongst ourselves."

"What do you think, Prasad and Abbayya Naidu?"

"What would they say, sir? They are contesting on our side. The entire group has one decision. The stage for compromise etc. is over. Call for nominations." The hippie-like fellow spoke like a political leader.

The hippie's behaviour reminded him of the dung-heap-scratching-hen. "It's up to you. But if there is any mismanagement you'll have to face the consequences ... come, let's go!" Serving the ultimatum Abbayya Naidu stood up. The rest of them followed him out. Prasad who went out

along with the rest came back to apologise. "I'm sorry, sir. We didn't want to hurt you. All of us respect you. We know you. These problems are worrying some of us. We feel the Gram Panchayat elections are better than these college elections.

"Why have you got into this muck?" the Principal sounded hurt.

"Circumstances, sir."

Abbayya Naidu's voice was heard from outside the room. "Come back, Prasad. There's nothing more to discuss, they're all together."

"Ok sir,"

'They're all together!' Oh, Abbayya Naidu! Let's see if you could win votes without the backing of your father's money. If caste is the deciding factor, let Prasad, who's much more intelligent than you and who belongs to your caste be the Chairman...get your sister married to Prasad...it's not right to instigate innocent people and make use of them. The Principal was filled with disgust.

There was a staff council meeting that evening. It lasted three hours. The Principal once again understood that academic discussions don't solve problems. Cautiousness is the only answer to instant problems. The Principal proposed that whether it's direct or indirect elections, there should be no campaigning, kidnapping, and as soon as the class representatives are elected, within an hour the chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, joint secretary and other executive members should be elected; that the elected candidates should be brought to the principal's office by the faculty. There was a resolution that the faculty would work towards it with all sincerity.

Whatever be the resolutions, the principal wanted to consult committee chairman Kota Reddy and

Correspondent Rangayya Choudhary and preserve the image of the student body. But the chairman and the correspondent never returned from Hyderabad. It took four days to contact them through long distant calls on phone. Their message was to make sure that there was no problem and that they couldn't come back. He thought that time alone would solve all problems and called for nominations.

A day before the date for withdrawals of nominations there were clashes between the two factions. While one group camped in Janardhana Reddy's brandy shop and Venku Reddy's brother-in-law's restaurant, the other group met at Venkatrama Naidu's bother's wine shop and the cinema hall of the candidate for chairmanship, Abbayya Naidu's father. They never had any agreement that they shouldn't fight in the night.

Equipped with permits they secured with each other's help, both the college committee chairman and the committee correspondent came back in a car to show their unhappiness over the trouble that erupted in their absence. They sat in judgement in the name of caste.

Abbayya Naidu became the chairman of the college. The vice-chairmanship and the secretary positions went to some Niranjana Reddy and Subba Reddy respectively. One Rama Naidu became the joint secretary. Prasad who stood for the secretary's position got only the class representative's position. Later, on the Principal's advice he was made the secretary of the Telugu Language Association. That evening the hippie group representative was felicitated by Abbayya Naidu. Peace was restored in the college.

Jabnardhana Reddy bragged that he worked towards compromise to preserve the image of the college with the chairman and correspondent's help.

In about a month's time there were clashes in the college about the establishment of a canteen. The Principal understood that he couldn't escape from trouble shooting.

Janardhan came to the principal to discuss the tenders for the restaurant. This time Venku Reddy was not with him, Abbayya Naidu accompanied him. As soon as he came, Janardhana Reddy explained his 'custom'. "Because someone complained you closed down the canteen run by my brother-in-law. Whether that was right or wrong is not what I came to discuss. This time my brother has submitted a tender. I came to know that the owner of a restaurant, Venku Reddy's brother too has submitted a tender quoting lower rates.

"How did you know even before we have opened the seal of the tenders?"

"Venku Reddy is spreading the word." The Principal was surprised at the immediate response from Abbayya Naidu. He could see that Abbayya Naidu would go a long way.

Janardhan Reddy said with irritation, "I didn't like Venku Reddy's ways. What should happen to my prestige as the committee member? It's not that the canteen would fetch a lot of income. It's against my 'custom' to lose my prestige. You may check with Abbayya Naidu about my custom."

Abbayya Naidu supported Janardhana Reddy. "Yes, sir. It won't do good to accept Venku Reddy's tender. Students won't like it." Abbayya Naidu's voice betrayed a threat. The principal changed the topic and remarked, "If both of you get together you can convince the students. In fact to do some good work caste doesn't pose a barrier..."

They didn't know what to say and left in the hope that he would agree with them.

It was strange that they came together. But of course the brandy shop and the cinema hall would have something in common. The Principal detested them once again.

The tenders were opened in the presence of the student union executive committee. Because they have quoted higher

rates the principal rejected the tenders of Janardhana Reddy's brother and the Economics Head Venku Reddy's brother-in-law. He accepted the tender of an erstwhile student of the college, an unemployed youth Joseph. Abbayya Naidu started a mulish argument that the students would like to accept the tender of Janardhana Reddy's brother. The Principal looked at Prasad helplessly.

Prasad gathered all his strength and said sharply, "Abbayya! Why do you want to force your opinion on the students and the student union/ Why are you so adamant about Janardhana Reddy's brother? The other day you accused him that he was using the caste card to provoke the students. And who petitioned against Janardhana Reddy's brother-in-law about the canteen? Do you want to fool us all?

Abbayya Naidu was irritated at this.

"Who are you to question me? I made you the class representative. Just because the Principal wanted you we agreed to make you the secretary of the worthless Telugu association. You are angry that we didn't allow you to become the general secretary. You are a destitute who can't even afford to get some pamphlets printed…you have the guts…"

"As I know what it is to be a destitute I want a destitute to get the chance to open a canteen."

The Principal looked at Prasad with appreciation.

Abbayya Naidu spat venom. "Yes, encourage all these fellows who have nowhere to go… they're showing their strength in the villages… let them also become…"

The Principal felt that he should interfere now. He said soothingly, "In your presence we've accepted the tender. no further arguments, please… Wasn't Joseph your classmate, Abbayya Naidu?" He led Abbayya Naidu to the door.

"If he doesn't run the canteen as per the.rules, we'll teach him a lesson then...come friends..."Abbayya Naidu left in a huff along with his friends.

One more hurdle crossed... thought the Principal. Niranjana Reddy came close to him and whispered, "Sir, it would have been more appropriate if it was given to some forward caste fellow instead of Joseph... suppose we call for tenders again..."

The Principle became enraged at the suggestion. "Please leave this issue...it's over...nasty intrigues..." At that Niranjan quietly left the place along with the rest of them. Prasad also left with his friends.

Prasad was troubled...

As Abbayya Naidu said he was a destitute. He understood what his caste was. He understood where he went wrong. He didn't belong to Abbayya Naidu or Janardhan's caste. His caste is 'destitute' caste.

Prasad's heart ached...

Inside the room was the Principal...

He was looking through the window at the students walking away, at the acacia trees spread all over the college campus, and at a couple of shameless buds of red gulmohar among them ...he was lost in his thoughts of facing the forthcoming trouble ...he was oscillating between hope and hopelessness...he stood there in his office...

Amidst the wild acacia, on the mud path, Prasad was walking with his friends.

"Kotayya!" the Principal called his peon.

"*Ayya!*"

'Why are there those acacia all over the college compound? Why don't they die even after we've cut them several times?"

"This time we'll pour kerosene at their roots and burn them".

"Do you think these stubborn trees would die then? Look, we should plant the gulmohar all over the campus."

"They don't grow in this soil."

"How did these two plants come up then? They must be crazy.. ok, close the door." The Principal got up from his seat impatiently.

"If we change the soil and nurture them in the customary way, perhaps they would grow here, *saar.*" Kotayya tried to defend himself.

"Stupid custom, have you been working for Janardhana Reddy, you are talking so much about custom?" the Principal burst into laughter.

The new recruit Kotayya thought the Principal was a little crazy.

The Power - push

It was an air-conditioned room in the guest house. Sudharani was not at all comfortable that evening. She fidgeted impatiently in her foam bed. There was a rustle of the magazines strewn around her. She got up from her bed in a huff and stood in front of the dressing mirror, playing with the pearl necklace. Suddenly she remembered something and took the Filmfare into her hands and started flipping the pages.

She looked at the coral necklace on the actress and thought that she must possess it, that she must tell her husband about it. Then she thought of Lord Venkateswara's jewellery during the *Kalyana Utsavam* and felt disturbed. She did not dare to desire such jewellery. Then she remembered her husband who had left her at home at two o'clock and went to the airport to see off the minister and became angry. She was annoyed with the Minister who prevented her from going to Kurnool.

Why should this 'liquor minister' visit there when they were at Tirupati. These ministers have no sense, wherever they went they should have some one of the deputy commissioner's stature at their beck and call. The ministers who may not stick to their position for a couple of days demand all kinds of attention like getting the right to offer special worship to the Lord, perform *Kalyana Utsavam*, and attention right from the time they get off the plane to the time they board the plane again.

Sudhrani looked at the watch. The plane to Hyderabad must have taken off. Her husband must be on his way back. She came out of her room. Outside the room the constables

engrossed in gossip shut up as soon as they saw her come out of the room. With folded hands they stood up, heads bent, ready to carry out her bidding.

If only the minister had not come there would be CIs in their place, she thought. The district superintendent would be here to attend to her. Now even the sub-inspector is not seen here.

At that moment Sudharani regretted that she was not the wife of a minister.

The constables were surprised that the lady, without giving them any instructions, silently climbed down the steps of the guest house and walked towards the flowerbeds. They knew that their surprise was always temporary. So they came out of the guest house and stood on guard on either side of the gate like the guards *Jaya* and *Vijaya*. The lady might look back any moment and give them some instructions, so they were in all readiness to obey her command.

The head-constable was smoking under a tree, thinking of his family and the officers who visit Tirupati on the pretext of office work and attend weddings; and their relatives who take advantage of the power of the officers and his lot to be at their service though it's not his duty; he was woken up from his reverie when he saw Sudharani walking towards him. The cigarette slipped off his fingers. In his confusion to stand on attention he dropped the magazine under his arms.

Sudharani was amused at the plight of Ganganna. She remembered her position and her smile evaporated on her lips. She gestured to him to follow her and went in to sit on the sofa.

It seemed it was not her husband but she was the deputy commissioner! He didn't know what she would ask him to do, where she would ask him to go! She had been really after his life for the last two days. Wives of the village headmen

were better than her, thought Ganganna as he hurried in to stand in attention in front of the lady. As they saw her waving her hand and Ganganna rushing to her *Jaya* and *Vijaya* thought, 'now she would ask us to do something and we'll have to run like dogs'.

The sight of Ganganna reminded Sudharani of the black pup that ran after her at her home in Kurnool.

"What's that magazine you had with you?" she asked him.

Ganganna ran to the tree and brought the magazine that fell down in his confusion, presented it to her in all humility and stood aside to do her bidding.

"Stand outside. It's time for *ayyagaru* to come back", so saying Sudharani started flipping the pages of the weekly casually.

Ganganna walked out abusing her to himself.

Sudha's caught the news about 'Love for Animals' in the weekly.

It was the news about a certain chief minister's daughter-in-law who had a variety of colourful birds, talking birds, parrots, mynahs for pets, and that of the Irish wolf dog that she had was one of the rarest species of dogs!

Sudharani was filled with jealousy, anger and impatience at the chief minister's daughter- in- law's love for animals.

Only the ministers, their sons, daughters-in-law, wives, and relatives become popular. Only they make news! As if only chief ministers' daughters-in-law have love for animals! Sometime ago a certain film star wrote an article in a magazine about dogs. She has many breeds of dogs for pets in her bungalow, though not Irish wolf-hounds and birds. She should desire them and she could get them in no time.

Sudharani wanted to get an Irish wolf hound and get her photo published in a weekly. She became all the more impatient now.

She heard cars stopping outside the guest house. She went into her room.

As he entered the room Sudhakara Rao apologised for being late. He became apprehensive at his wife's silence. "We're leaving for Kurnool early tomorrow morning." He began to change his dress after he announced.

Sudharani asked him coyly, "I want an Irish wolf hound."

Sudhakara Rao said with a smile as he started unlacing his shoe, "Why didn't you get it? There seem to be some book shops around here. Let's send the CI. Who has written it?"

Sudharani felt irritated. If he weren't in this job this man was not even fit to be a clerk in a tobacco company. Her father, owner of two tobacco companies, got her married to him though he was not from a rich family, because of the job he held, and the power his job wielded.

"It's not a novel but a rare and prestigious breed of dog…look at this weekly".

Sudhakara Rao looked at the news in the weekly his wife almost threw at him. These newsmen, political leaders and their families are matchless in creating trouble for others, he thought impatiently. For a while Sudhakara Rao didn't understand how to get that rare and prestigious Irish hound. When it occurred to him he said to his wife, "Anyway we're going to Bangalore next month. Let's try for it there."

Sudharani looked happy. "Ask your superintendent to come in."

Her command was obeyed. The district superintendent came in hesitantly. He almost went crazy at Sudharani's words, more so at her desire. Sudharani told him to get her the hound somehow from Bombay or Bangalore. For fifteen minutes Sudhakara Rao lectured to the superintendent about his wife's love for animals while the superintendent kept nodding his head.

"You must promise to get it within a week" said Sudharani.

"Certainly, madam," said the district superintendent.

"If our men try, nothing is difficult," said Sudhakara Rao.

"Yes sir, I'll arrange to get it"

The district superintendent promised them and went out of the room shaking his head. This is an emergency desire, he had to fulfil it. He ran his hand over his bald pate.

Behind the blurred image of the Irish hound he could see the power off his boss, Sudharani's father's tobacco companies and their political prominence. The district superintendent remembered the five more years of golden egg laying goose-like service he had. He thought of the chance he got now to suppress the scandal he was involved in during the Emergency. He thanked the dog he had never seen in his life.

The superintendent wondered how he would identify this particular dog from among the thousands of breeds when he didn't have any idea about dogs and their breeds. He was annoyed with himself for looking at himself as an ordinary person.

The next day immediately after the deputy commissioner and his wife left in their car he called for a meeting of the circle inspectors. He gave them the responsibility of acquiring an Irish wolf hound, and then ran his hand over his bald pate with satisfaction.

Each one of them wanted to somehow get this dog and present it to the DC's wife but was apprehensive of the risk involved. CI Rayudu, as he had some knowledge about dogs, came forward to do the job if he got his 'share'.

Rayudu had his own reasons for it. Some six months ago, when he was working in Anantapur district, the DC went there on a tour. Sudharani wanted to eat prawns. She loved

prawns. She insisted on having a ginger prawn on the dining table. There were no prawns available in Anantapur that day. Rayudu made a trip to Bengalore in search of it. Unfortunately they were not available even in Bangalore, so he rang up Cochin and got them from Cochin on plane, got them transported to the Penakacherla Dam guesthouse in a car, served them to her on the table and got her appreciation. Such was his reputation. Because he took the risk of going to Bangalore he could make some money also. He got into the good books of the DC. Now he got an opportunity to retain his place and also to protect his own interest.

The entire district got involved in the acquisition of fund for the Irish wolf hound. Nobody knew who contributed how much but Rayudu's kitty received twelve thousand rupees.

When he had taken up such a big responsibility for the sake of the DC, Rayudu thought it would be safe to have somebody docile like Ganganna with him on his trip to Bangalore. He asked one of the CIs to hire a car for him.

The search started for the Irish wolf hound in Bangalore. It took nine days for Rayudu to get the information that a foreigner who was to leave the country in about a week had an Irish wolf hound with him.

The foreigner took a couple of hours explaining how dear the dog was to him, how gentle it was, how much care one should take about it and how rare the breed was before he sold it.

Rayudu's happiness knew no bounds when he found the Irish wolf hound. That night he thought one egg less wouldn't make a difference to the basketful and that it was alright to spend a thousand from the fund on himself. He gave one hundred rupees to Ganganna to enjoy himself.

Ganganna was flabbergasted at all this racket. He thought the money spent on this dog could have got two of his four sisters married. But he detested himself for the first time for coveting the dog's money.

Rayudu and Ganganna brought the Irish wolf hound in the car royally. They stopped the car at the DC's house and took the dog in. One must live in such a bungalow, thought Rayudu He looked at the 'khaki knickers' watering the variety of flowerbeds, and Ganganna thought that his life too would be confined to such chores. Sudharani, walking amidst the flowerbeds saw the dog and the two constables. Her eyes fell on the dog that accompanied them.

It was about two and a half feet tall. She looked at the Irish wolf hound which looked like a ram covered with a black blanket. She thought, 'Beastly, nasty animal' and looked around with disgust. "*Rey*, Amir! Pullanna! Have all of you dropped dead?" she shouted, trembling with anger.

The peons and constables came running to her in all obedience.

"Who allowed them in? Rascals! Nonsense! Each one of you has been feeding on the government money and has become arrogant. Where's that fellow Subbanna who's supposed to be on guard at the gate? He should be dismissed." Sudharani started abusing in English and in Telugu.

Looking at Sudharani's enraged person Rayudu got scared. Then he remembered how he served her the prawns, and picked up enough courage to mumble. "Madam... I...for you... in the car..."

"What nonsense are you speaking, whoever you are? Take that bastard of a dog out first. I can't stand it for a minute...what are you waiting for?..."

Rayudu felt as if centipedes were crawling all over his body. How dare a woman abuse him in the presence of the

peons and constables! Then he remembered his job and asked Ganganna to walk out with his mouth shut.

He asked the constable attending to the DC, "Why did she get so angry at the dog we got on her order? We acquired it with great difficulty, spending ten thousand rupees."

The constable giggled and said, "I too am puzzled. But I heard someone saying that she read somewhere that dogs cause some diseases. She sold off all her dogs, of course to our staff. But did she look after the dogs when the bungalow was full of them? We had our hands full then. We looked after them with more care than we looked after our children. We are relieved now. After some godman visited her she's now occupied with flowerbeds and books and what they call TM..."

"Who knows what new fancy would get into her? Then we'll have a dog's life...."

Rayudu and Ganganna looked at the youth who interrupted them. "*Ore* Subbanna, you heard us, haven't you? The lady is angry that you were not found at the gate....Your end is in sight...."

"After all what could she do, dismiss me? How does it matter?" Ganganna was surprised at Subbanna's confidence in himself.

The constable asked Rayudu, "Sir, please let me have fifty rupees, please, of course from the dog fund..." As Rayudu took out a fifty rupee note mechanically, Subbanna remarked, "Dog feed".

"You, what do you know, you're still young. Sir, please get into the car. Bye. *Orey* Subbanna, you may go home now, that's all for today, I think." Said the constable with a smile as he walked in.

Getting into the car, Rayudu started thinking why the job given to him by the DC boomeranged. What should he do with the dog now?

Ganganna mumbled. "Why are there people like this lady?"

"As long as there are people who are at their beck and call...till people hound them out and chase them, all such officers and their wives, their children and their relatives keep playing such games..." said Subbanna spitting out the *beedi* he was smoking.

Any other time Rayudu would have kicked someone speaking thus. But now he quietly asked the driver to start the car.

'How did Subbanna get such confidence? He would certainly lose his job. Does he always talk like this, or is it just barking of a dog?' Ganganna was lost in thought. It should not be just backbiting... he hoped with all his heart as he fondly looked at Subbanna who voiced the pain in his heart.

The Hunt

Kotayya couldn't understand his son. Before he sat down to eat his supper he called out to his son who was silently lying down without changing his uniform. "You go ahead" was his short response.

Perhaps he missed his wife who had gone to her mother's home for her delivery. Perhaps not. Perhaps he was chastised by his senior officer. But it is good to be chastised once in a while. One gets stronger only when he encounters disappointments; Kotayya had his food and came into the room. His son was not up yet. 'Had he got into some problem?' he wondered and asked, "What's wrong with you?"

"I can't get on with this job. This is not fit for a human being." Kotayya was shocked at the firmness in Eswarayya's voice.

'How easily is he mouthing these words? In all his thirty-year-service he never once had dreamt of uttering such words. He retired as a guard and fathered ten children and pleading with the officers and pleasing them in every possible way, he got him the temporary job of the forester with so much difficulty, and now he wants to give it up! Has he forgotten that he was unemployed for four years after he got the useless B.Sc. degree? Now he says this job is not fit for a human being! As if all those who are working there are wild animals! If he were asked to wish for a *Kamadhenu* or *Kalpavriksham* he would instead ask for a job as a ranger in a place where there's plenty of rosewood and herds and herds of goat, and a job where there's no retirement! Is this

fellow born of me? Right from his childhood this has been his way! Headstrong fellow. His head needs to be fixed, otherwise who knows where he would end up?'

Kottayya made up his mind and asked his son, "Why? Had the ranger *saar* or the DFO scolded you? Why should you care for these officers and their anger? It was different with the white men. They were born officers. Their chastening was decent, so were their kicks. When I was a watchman in Bilerooty, then you were not yet born, do you know what happened once...?"

'Now he'll start his yarns,' thought Eswarayya and turned away.

Kotayya started talking like one possessed.

"The D F O was our own man, but he had taken after the white man. He was camping with us. He was used to the morning coffee at five o'clock. I had walked all the way to the village in the dark of the night to get a *sere* of milk. But while I was boiling it all of it spilt. I was very scared. I made some coffee with whatever milk was left. "Why is the coffee so black?" he was annoyed. I told him a lie that I couldn't get any milk. "If you couldn't get milk, milk your wife, you bastard..."

"Why didn't you bury him then and there in the forest?" Eswarayya got up in all anger.

Kotayya laughed and asked him, "Suppose we abuse the firewood gatherers and the shepherds in the forest...do they bury us? Big beings are big and the small ones are small!"

Eswarayya suddenly got up from the bed and started talking with all anger. "That's the reason I said I don't want this job which tortures the small lives. Today the ranger asked us to go on a raid. We did. Do you know why? If we don't book a case every month the boss won't be happy. We have to show some revenue. On top of it there's this flying

squad. It's not for the sake of sincerity or to protect the forest... Today, unfortunately we caught an old woman almost on the verge of death, with a bundle of firewood. Then we caught a couple of young brats hardly ten or twelve years old, with half a bag of charcoal and there was an old man with about ten goats.

I feel ashamed to think of the incident. When our men chased her the old woman fell down and on top of her fell the bundle of firewood. The children ran into the thorny bushes. Even if they bribe them the men would abuse and kick them mercilessly. 'Just the other day I gave you a hen and now you are doing this injustice to me, you...' the old woman ranted. 'I sent you a goat, how do you think we'd live...' the old man cried. On top of this cruelty for every bundle of firewood ten rupees fine, for every goat the fine is five rupees and for every half bag of charcoal thirty rupees levy of fine. Where would they bring so much money? Still they would come to the forest for firewood, to graze their goats, get kicked, and pay fine. I can't be so cruel. I don't want to be on duty in the forest. I can't guard the forest like this. I don't want this job that squeezes out the poorest of the poor. If we have guts we should catch those who earn lakhs of rupees from the forest wealth.

Eswarayya expressed his anguish. He felt relieved and lay quiet again.

Listening to his son Kotayya almost lost his head. He thought of the play *Kurukshetram* he watched some time ago. He started sermonising on the essence of life as he experienced it.

"My son, you live in a forest. Your job is in the forest. Whatever you are speaking, something called mercy for fellow beings, and it doesn't work in the society. Each one is unto himself here. You are not the saviour of others. It's only ten days since you've got into this job and you are

behaving rather crazy. You talk like that person called the Buddha. Let me ask you a question. Did you get your job on somebody's mercy? No. Why did I spend a couple of thousands? Suppose some officer camps at Talakona guest house and asks for dinner, would your ranger allow you to go? Though you don't take a small coin as bribe would he believe you? He would suspect you and say, "You son of a ...get me my share", and take a couple of hundreds of rupees from you, that moustachioed ranger of yours. Aren't there customary collections? When your wife comes back with a new-born child would the society bring it up out of sympathy? No. Those who live in the forest live their own lives of trouble. Our jobs depend on them. Don't speak of mercy and such sentiments. This is jungle life. Don't walk on clouds. You speak of catching those who earn lakhs from the forest. Do you think this is like a college strike? People like Santhamma earn their fortune on the forest, yes. What can you do about it? You have to be in their good books. Now, about the small-time traders, they are meant to be so. In the reserved forest if he hears the bleating of a goat your DFO would stretch his hand even in his sleep for the one fourth of the rupee as fine. If he has no mercy, why should you have? Who are you to speak about justice and injustice? These are jungle laws..."

When his son didn't respond he asked again, "Now what do you say?" Then he realised that he had fallen asleep. "Ok, it must be just a temporary dissatisfaction about his job". Kotayya laughed to himself and fell asleep. Kotayya was unhappy that his son went to bed without his dinner.

In his sleep, Eswarayya heard strange noises, saw strange scenes. Eswarayya felt as if someone had jerked his mind, and prodded his heart with a thorny hand. He felt disturbed.

The dream continued.

Who? Who's it?

In the Reserved forest he saw khaki dress. The firewood bearing old woman was in the khaki dress, children with unkempt hair and the old shepherd. The DFO, the Ranger, and the guards were with firewood on their heads, and grazing goats. Those in the khaki dress were chasing and abusing the shabbily dressed DFO, the Ranger the guards and the watchmen.

It's strange! Why don't they turn back and retort? What evil had befallen them?

He was watching it all from a distance.

Oh, what's that?

Flying squad! Red Sanders Flying Squad!

Running helter-skelter! Blind chasing! Into the wild groves, thorny bushes, into the sea of rocks. Running, chasing, jumping.

The old DFO hoisted his bundle of firewood onto his shoulders. The moustachioed Ranger fell into the thorns.

Eswarayya was laughing. As he was laughing, he turned into a goat. Mey...mey...mey. He started bleating. His father was driving him along. 'Go....you wretched thing...go and graze in the forest' he said.

Now who's that? He didn't remember her, an old woman transformed into a beautiful woman, and around her were the DFOs, and Rangers.

The goat was caught. He was caught. 'Goat meat is delicious" said she... Santhamma. Men in khaki clothes were slitting his throat. Mey...mey...mey. His pregnant wife was weeping. Blood... blood.. the forest was full of blood....blood of the burning charcoal flames....his throat was slit...

Eswarayya woke up with a start. His heart was pounding against his chest. Nightmare. Eswarayya couldn't sleep the entire night.

Early in the morning the watchman came and called him. "The DFO wants you immediately at the guest house," he said. His eyes burning, feeling irritated and impatient, he got into his uniform and reached the forest bungalow.

The DFO looked him up and down and said quietly, 'Your Range Officer has gone on leave for a week. The Flying Squad may be here any time. Be careful. If you act funny you'll be sent home."

Eswarayya wanted to know when he had acted funny. His lips were dry and he couldn't speak.

The DFO said again, "Guard Polayya will explain the rest of it. You can go..." Eswarayya came out wiping his perspiration off.

He swallowed his anger and asked Guard Polayya, "What's all this Polayya?"

"Oh, the boss's words? How will you stick on to this job? Yesterday you sympathised with the firewood thieves. You are not fit to be your father's son. Though only a guard, he ruled the forest like a king as long as he was working. And you..." Polayya started laughing.

Eswarayya didn't like the guard laughing at him, a forest ranger. He remembered his own cadre. But then he also remembered how old Polayya was and controlled himself.

"What's the matter?"

"It's nothing. The DFO of the Red Sanders Flying Squad has his eye on our range. He suddenly pounces on us in the dark of any night. He's very strict. We have sandalwood only in our forest and it is also smuggled out only from our range and that too from our section. Some wretched fellow would give him information about the time and place the lorries ply and where to catch them. Moreover the son of an ass, the guard and the son of an ass the watchman act as informers on the sly. They catch the lorries. Santhama's people punish

us as traitors. The Flying Squad would write remarks about us that we have been careless and have not been doing our duty properly. This is a vicious circle. Our boss is about to retire from service. He doesn't want any problem now. He would like us to inform Santhamma's people ahead about the raid of the Squad.

"Has he told you?"

"Do the officers speak about such things, sir? We have to find out and take care. Once we covet others' money..."

"Whose money?"

"As if you don't know, sir. Hasn't your father told you... ask him.. you're still new to this."

Eswarayya tried to understand the secret. Jungle rule, jungle justice perhaps depend on jungle levies. He asked weakly. "What should I do now?"

"What can you do, sir? The Ranger is not in town. And this great lady Santhamma wants that two lorry loads of sandalwood have to be sent to Madras this very night. The Japanese steamer is leaving the day after. This Flying Squad DFO doesn't believe in 'live and let live'. If we speak to this Officer for half an hour we too will turn into informers. You haven't met him yet."

Eswarayya wanted•to meet this Flying Squad DFO.

Polayya pulled a long face and said, "Look here sir, My wife is admitted to a hospital in Tirupati. She is very ill it seems. I've already told the boss that I'll go on leave. Please tell your father about this and though he is retired now he helps us out always in these matters. I'd like to be here but my wife....?"

"Ok, you go. I hope she's better now. We'll manage somehow."

Eswarayya's sympathy moved Polayya for a minute. He believed him though he told him a lie. He should have been in a job as a teacher somewhere. This Kotayya's greed to earn more made him get this job for him. He may invite trouble someday...Polayya sympathised with him but escaped from the situation.

Eswarayya was terribly disturbed. He was filled with fear and excitement. His courage to catch the big fish raised its head. It's not like hunting out the small- time firewood filcher like the old woman. If he had guts he should hunt tigers like Santhamma. He should chase them out and kill them...

Eswarayya remembered his college days when he was studying for his B.Sc., when he led a strike and made a big hotel owner to reduce the prices. He came to a decision.

He went home and told his father what Polayya informed.

Kotayya looked at his son in appreciation and said, "I worked for ten years in this Nerabayalu range in which you're working now. Officers, contractors, everyone that depended on the forest lived and let others live. Tomorrow when the Flying Squad comes divert them from the Puthukota route...."

Eswarayya nodded his head.

The next day the Flying Squad jeep arrived.

They started inspecting the forest routes along with Eswarayya. Early in the morning around for o'clock as they lay in wait, as expected the two lorries were seen. But in a jiffy they fled to the border and disappeared into Madras state.

Though they couldn't catch the lorries, Eswarayya got his transfer to the Flying Squad. Soon after that the DFO of the Flying Squad Rajarao was transferred to the Working Plan section in Kurnool. With Rajarao's transfer Eswarayya's backbone was broken. He was once again transferred to the regular section.

The day he took charge as the Forest Ranger, Kotayya spoke to his son very calmly. "Now everyone has come to know of your patriotism. You would have known what it was if the lorries were caught that day. Some head strong fellow of an officer would be strict. But don't think that the country is full of them. Don't think you can get things done through them. The Flying Squad DFO's appreciation will not protect you. The 'regulars' have complained against you that you have been taking bribes. And the complainants are those people with whom you sympathised. Be practical. Think of your family. You and me have to live off those who are beneath us but to think that those who are above us will support us will lead to our destruction.

Eswarayya was confused. He didn't understand why the new Flying Squad DFO agreed to his transfer. The old man is telling a lie that the shepherds had complained against him. It's a black lie. They would never do it. They cannot do such a thing.

That evening Polayya came running to tell him that in their section there was a herd of sheep and that the DFO was going to catch them. In his section, in his beat!

There was a rush of khaki dresses. Bundles were dropped, kicks. Old and young running in fear of fine...screams as if their tails were cut off, all over the forest, scattered, chased...goats and ewes...

The DFO shouted at him. "Where were you, you blackguard! You were not attending to your duty. Were you away to inform the Flying Squad? I'll kick you in the groins. Aren't the petitions enough for you? Go, get them! You rascal! Chase those goats. Why are you staring at me? Have you lost your senses? Go, run..."

Not understanding who he was abusing, Eswarayya ran into the forest, chasing the goats...amidst the goats...

The Cosmic Vision

"*Bava,* I understand your apprehensions. Do you agree with me at least now? Have I not taken three runs in three days? I got three 'brackets', how? Because this is a scientific game. Now, you think with your M A Mathematics brain. If only you didn't have the disbelief, in these three days we'd have had about ten or twelve rupees in our pocket. When would you learn to save like me from your twenty-acre highland, you always look to the sky for rains." Krishnayya was talking enthusiastically to his brother-in-law Parthu.

In Parthu's brain the numbers of *matka* gambling game were rotating speedily. His mind's eye could see the thousands of rupees that slipped away from him.

Parthu remembered his uncle who, when alive, was always engaged in drawing maps of old temples in the hope of laying hands on some lost , buried treasure and always at the side of mendicants who promised to make gold out of nothing. He remembered how by the time his uncle died three fourths of the wealth of the undivided family was squandered away. He remembered his other uncle who made lakhs of rupees in '*mangatai*' game and then lost everything to live on debts.

He remembered his father, who never had any bad habits but was in debts as he relied on the yield of his land, his two sisters waiting to get married, his younger brother who was not interested in education and himself, who was unemployed and the problems he was facing in the village trying to help his father....

"Your *bava* has lost the twenty *tolas* of gold he got from selling land in *matka*", thoughts of his sister's letter full of concern, his father's advice that he should make his brother-in-law see reason, and in his presence his *bava* earned three eightieth times with three fifties, were worrying Parthu.

Parthu was getting confused with thoughts of his earlier experience, intelligence, overpowering desire, and the unknown fears.

His silence encouraged Krishnayya to be more vocal. "If you have a head on your shoulders, you can earn thousands of rupees. Where is the question of deception in this? In fact, this is an 'industry' that has given employment to thousands 'companies' and 'beaters'.

Parthu sighed. "Ok, if you are doing well, it's fine". He couldn't add 'somehow' to his words.

'Thank god there won't be any problem now' thought Kṛishnayya and he said his words betraying confidence, 'I want all of us to do well".

Parthu was silent.

That evening his sister showed her new jewellery and said happily to her brother, 'I was hasty in writing to you. Your *bava* wanted them to be recast as they were out of fashion, the goldsmith delayed delivering them, tell father... Don't they look good?"

Parthu's doors of knowledge opened up watching his sister's happiness.

He took leave of his *bava* and sister and got back to his village.

"I gave my daughter in marriage to him as he is my sister's son. But he turned out to be a rascal. Would he behave himself henceforth? Did he tell you about the gold?" His father raged as soon as he stepped into the house. "He's better off than us. The gold is safe with him" said Parthu. Parthu's father didn't bother about anything else.

Parthu later had a look at the '*matkachart*' he brought with him on the sly. For a few days he tried his calculations, examined every aspect of it, looked into every day and week, and contemplated the opening, closing, bracket, the numbers, runs and opposites and so on. He was glad that though his knowledge in mathematics he got from his MA didn't fetch him a job it helped him in this matter. He believed that *matka* was mathematical knowledge.

Only one person in the village noticed his study and warned him. He was Parthu's friend Chennakesavulu, who, like him was an educated unemployed youth. But Parthu could not understand a word of Chennakesavulu's hour long lecture on the ways of investment. Even in the university he behaved liked that. He put up with him for two years as his room-mate. He stopped seeing him. Parthu's inquisitiveness would've stopped short of experience.

But Parthu encountered a problem in his village. To reach the *matka* centre at Simhadripuram from his village, he had to walk four kilometres and then take a bus to travel about seven to eight kilometres. He casually enquired and was surprised to learn that the 'beaters' come and take the numbers to Simhadripuram and that even old women on the verge of death take out their numbers from the sari hems and boxes. For fun he gave a half-rupee or one-fourth of a rupee to friends to play for him and earned a couple of hundreds. Soon Parthu became a *matkaguru* for the youngsters in the village. But he was not very happy with that. He couldn't stake huge amounts while staying in the village. Once in a while he failed in some 'runs'. When he looked at the results, sometimes he would discover some reasons for the 'brackets'. These loopholes were nagging him. Meanwhile someone brought news that Krishnayya *bava* earned another forty thousands in *matka.*

'After all he's a smart fellow" when his father remarked looking at him accusingly he felt insulted and waited for the right time to prove himself.

Around that time Parthu had to go to Tadiparti to attend some wedding.

His *bava* was looking successful and fresh and he said in appreciation, "*Bava*, as you said it's a scientific game. But when I think of some numbers as 'sure' they fail me. I don't understand some others I get in the chart."

Krshnayya asked him 'How much?"

'I'm just studying it out of my interest in mathematics, that's all"

"Tell me the truth"

"How can I afford, I'm not like you"

"How much?"

"About a couple of hundreds. But as I said, with all those problems"

"I see" he said and started sermonising. "Every theory has its weaknesses. If there are no loopholes no theory can be called a theory. To find out the loopholes one should have some extraordinary powers. You can see evidence of this, if you want."

Driven by curiosity and surprise Parthu followed Krishnayya. Both of them walked past the Buggaramalingeswaraswami temple on the south bank of the lake and also the Chintalaraya temple.

"He is normally seen here. But he's not in either place!" said Krisnayya...

Even before Parthu asked his question, he spotted the figure in the lake and happily shouted "There he is!"

Both of them approached a weird person in tatters, with crazy looks and smile. To this creature, Krishnayya said, "Swami, it's me...Krishnayya."

"Krishna and Arjuna" said the creature and fell into silence.

"Let's go" said Krishnayya happily.

For Parthu everything looked confusing. After they walked a distance Krishnayya almost hugged him and said, "We're very lucky today!"

"How?"

"I told you that only some rare extraordinary powers alone can find out the weaknesses. He is called the *matkaswami* here. He talks in mystic numbers. Sometimes he abuses. The person he abuses is lucky on that day. Whatever he does he earns a lot on that day. Once it happened that one Jani Basha, a lorry owner went to him. He was abused as "You son of a pig!" Whatever be it, a regular visitor to mosque shouldn't have been thus abused, thought 'amali Kasim sahib who was with Jani Basha as they were walking back. They came across a pig and its five piglets. That's it! he thought of the 'opening' as 1, 'closing' as 5 and the 'bracket' as 15. With great difficulty, pawning everything he had he could stake three hundred rupees and got a profit of twenty four thousand rupees. Jani Basha was all regret. There are umpteen such stories. The other day I got forty thousand rupees with the swami's blessings. I'll talk about it some other time. There's a problem with the swami. He normally doesn't talk to human beings. Usually he's found in the Ramalingeswaraswami temple near the place Parasurama did his penance. He's always in meditation. You'll see my sure shot today.

Parthu couldn't understand Krishnayya's excitement.

He wanted to ask, "What about the madcap...." He stopped short of saying and instead asked, "What's the meaning of his words?"

"What's Krishna's number among the siblings?"

"He was the eighth born ...so eight"

"Arjuna?"

"I think he's the third"

"That means 83 'bracket' is a sure shot. Look at the 'chart'. There's that 'run'.

Krishnayya took out the chart from his pocket and looked at the 'run'.

"But today it says there's a run of 38." Said Parthu showing the numbers in the chart.

"That means its opposite should be the loophole number 38 you took out."

Parthu was not very convinced. "Our names are the same. Perhaps he said it by chance" even before he uttered these words, Krishnayya said, "Doubts lead us to destruction. Who do you think he is? He's a great saint."

Parthu stifled his apprehension and asked "Where does he come from?"

"Who knows? He has been around since last month. They say he disappears in the night....ok...come along...it's getting late...." Krishnayya hurried him up. Parthu was thoroughly confused. Where were they being led to?

Looking at the crowd at the *matka* centre and the respect Krishnayya wielded him there Parthu thought, 'as father said *bava* is a smart fellow'. Krishnayya *bava* staked two thousand rupees on the number 83. Parthu staked the hundred out of the two he had brought along, on 83.

That evening he was forced to have some whiskey with his brother-in-law after his sister served him dinner. Then he reached the *matka* centre at nine o'clock along with his *bava*. He was stunned to learn that the 'opening' number was 8. He wondered if the 'closing' would be three, as Krishnayya looked at him with confidence.

He thought his *bava* would get one lakh and sixty thousand rupees while he would get his measly eight thousand rupees in the morning. He must wait and watch.

"Let's go to a cinema, we can walk out in the middle." Krishnayya suggested.

Parthu couldn't concentrate on the cinema.

Around midnight they came out of the cinema and walked to the 'company'. Meanwhile Krishnayya had another quarter peg. Parthu sat there looking at his *bava* with all apprehension, listening to all the hustle and bustle, two packets of cigarettes. Around 'zero hour' they got the 'closing' number. It was 3!

Krishnayya's happiness knew no bounds while Parthu's regret was unlimited.

"Let's go to the *matka* swami again tomorrow, *bava*." He said.

"Ok, *bava*" said Krishnayya.

Next morning when they couldn't find the matka swami anywhere, Parthu was more disappointed than Krishnayya. They wanted to see what the 'run' that day was and remembered that it was a Sunday. Parthu wanted to try it back in his village.

Parthu lost about ten thousand. Apart from the famine brought by lack of rains when his son borrowed such a huge sum his father was worried. His son was unemployed, useless and so nobody wanted to give his daughter in marriage to him and now just because he had come of age he had started getting into debts. He disowned his son. He divided his property so that nobody would lend him.

Parthu was utterly demoralised and had nobody to turn to. Then he remembered Chennakesavulu and went to pour out his heart to him.

Chennkesavulu was all sympathy. "We are educated and students of science at that. We should think. Don't mind that I'm blaming you. Why do you think so many people jump into the fire of *matka* as if they're walking on the fire during the *peeru festival*? They hope they would win money. How can they when the entire institution is like a destructive fire? We wouldn't be getting any job. Even if we get jobs there won't be any significant change in our lives. We should think of a life which doesn't depend only on luck."

For the first time Parthu tried to understand Chennakesavulu's anguish.

Meanwhile he got a letter from his sister. "*Bava* has gone crazy. Come and meet us" she wrote. Someone in love with *matka* brought the detailed news. Krishnayya didn't stop at playing *matka*. He opened a *matka* company and invested all his money in it. He used his brain and though several numbers got the 'load' of thousands of rupees he wanted to prove the numbers won't work and sent them to the centre. The numbers were struck and as the centre at Bombay had no responsibility for the loss, the company ran into debts and he had to close shop. He got into drinking. With debts and drinking he had gone mad. He might even lose his job.

The entire family, along with Parthu, reached Tadiparthi. Krishnayya had run away from home. They started looking for him in the streets.

Parthu thought of the places where the *matka* swami was found. He might find his brother-in-law there. Parthu walked there with all apprehension.

Exactly at the spot where they found the matka swami, there was somebody naked and shouting crazily. Parthu trembled with fear. He wanted to turn back and bring along some people to confirm if he was Krishnayya *bava*. But he picked up courage to go ahead.

In front of him was Krishnayya! Krishnayya shouting crazily!

'*Orey*, who are you? Look at me dazzling like *matka*. You can't see me with your naked eye. I'll give you the divine power. I'm the Bombay *matka*. I'm the Bezwada *matka*. Look how people are getting into my mouth like locusts falling into fire. Look at me licking blood. 'Opening' 'closing', a sure business. 'Opened' a big load... investment 'closed'... Lord Chintalaraya....Lord Ramalingeswara .....*matka* swami....I'm the *matka* swami...."

Krishnayya *bava*, gesticulating, beating his feet in the sand, with blood-shot eyes, open mouth, with his tongue protruding....

For the first time Parthu had the cosmic vision!

The cosmic vision that didn't know its own direction.

Now, only Chennakesavulu's words were ringing in Parthu's ears.

Suppose the Day Comes

Though it was the month of *Asweeyujam* the sun was so hot that there were no rain drops. Heat was scorching the villages, crops, and the lives of the farmers who depended on them...

There was shade in the police station built high and strong at Ramapuram. In the shade of power was sub-inspector Subbanna. In Subbanna's mind was the sun! It was a sun hotter than the one outside, the sun in his mind could scorch any creature that came into its vicinity!

He was sitting there with his legs hoisted up on the table, looking at the road in front, at the grass flowers, at the mounds full of wild bushes devoid of any greenness, at the lifeless village next to it. In his thoughts was Gangireddypalle station where he had worked till recently. The village under the jurisdiction of the station, its sugarcane crops, the squabbles, killings and amidst the *Kurukshetram* his earnings, were playing in his mind's eye.

Subbanna fell into a reverie of self criticism and criticism of others.

'Damn the station! What was wrong with the bastardly white men, that they built this station amidst the wretched mounds? And for this useless station there's a sub inspector, a writer, and ten constables. What's the use of such a station? Why should that young fellow of an SP transfer me here? 'Do you think you can always live on murder cases, I'll send you to a place where you can't get a *naya paisa*', he remarked before he sent him here. Though he spent ten thousand rupees it was of no use. He could escape suspension from

the job, thanks to his stars. He should have taken money from both the parties in the murder case. They had filed petitions. When he gave his statement as a witness the judge chided him. He passed a stricture for conniving with the accused. *Che, che!* He lost his earnings. It's about a week since he had arrived in these mounds in the Badvelu Taluka. Not a *dammidi* income here...let me see.... Let me wait...'

Subbanna's eyes fell on the cart on the road going towards the village. He came out and stood on the veranda of the station. Constable Kasim, who also was transferred to the place like him, was dozing on the veranda. He saw the inspector and stood up. Subbanna gazed at the bundles on top of the cart. He looked at the old bullocks, saliva dripping, painfully dragging the weight of cart. He looked at the old farmer sitting on the front rafter of the cart reluctantly urging the bullocks with his whip. Kasim was the only senior constable-cum-writer present at the station, he remembered. He had driven all the others into the village, asking them to get some case or the other.

"*Rey*, Kasim!"

"*Appa!*"

"Stop that cart and call that old man."

Kasim went to the cart and spoke to the old man. The old man got off the cart, placed two stones under the wheels, tethered the bullocks and followed the constable. He stood there wiping his sweat with a soiled, torn towel.

"What have you in the cart?"

"Sorghum, *saami.* Five bags of them....three bags of green sorghum and two bags of white sorghum....last year there were no rains...you can see what's the situation this year...not a drop till now. Whatever was planted had become dust. It was difficult for us to get on , so I've got some grain from my relatives who live some distance

away…hard times…if this continues for another year we'll be forced to leave the village…we can't afford to have sentiments about the birth place."

Subbanna felt it was stuff and nonsense. His conscience was pricked somewhere in the recess. He felt that the heat in his mind was cooled by a whiff of a cloud.

"So what do you say?" he said absent-mindedly.

The old man couldn't understand the policeman's intentions.

"Ok *saami.* Let me go. Where do I have the leisure to chat with you in shade? The sun is really killing. The bullocks are short of breath. I started early in the morning, and these old bullocks…plague be upon them…they have reached me here now…"

As the old man started walking off Subbanna hastened to say, "leave a couple of bags here."

The old man was surprised and said with a smile, "Do you think they are for sale? Am I that lucky? We don't have enough to eat… I was wondering how I should manage."

Subbanna didn't know what to say. Kasim understood what's in *appa's* mind and intervened.

"Look here old man, what's your name?"

"Somayya"

"Are you of *kapu* caste?"

"What's the use of a caste when you live hand to mouth?"

"How much land do you have?"

"Ten acres for name sake…if it rains…"

"Next to the lake?"

"One acre…but what's the use…this year even the frogs in the lake didn't have water to drink."

"How many children?"

Subbanna was irritated at Kasim and Somayya's conversation. He shouted at Kasim, "Are you going to give your daughter in marriage that you are getting all these details?"

No, *appa*, I'm coming to the point..." Kasim hesitated.

Somayya became suspicious at their behaviour.

Kasim asked him another question. "Look here old man, do you have any land disputes?" "Me? By the grace of Brahmam Reddy, in this village there have been no such disputes. Such things are found in the villages on the west"

Kasim couldn't think of any other question. Subbanna didn't know how to make him leave at least one bag of sorghum. He felt let down. Then he said stubbornly, with arrogance, "Leave one bag of white sorghum in the station."

"These are not very good variety *saami*. Ask Brahmam Raddy, he's generous. I'll also put in a word."

Subbanna couldn't make out whether Somayya was innocent or acting smart. He looked at Kasim with annoyance. Kasim thought he had to take things into his hands and said bluntly, "*Ayyagaru* likes white sorghum. Leave one bag in the station. He'll be of help to you in future."

"What do we need police help in our lives?...No...no... As long as Brahmam Reddy is around...even if there are no rains...people help us."

They heard the bullock horns hitting against the road. All of them looked in that direction. There was a cart coming from the opposite direction....there, a few people in it...

"This bullock on the left...may it be struck by plague...though it has grown old, if another bullock comes in its way it is ready for a fight." Somayya ran to his cart.

"Old rascal" Subbanna abused him forgetting that in a couple of years he too was to retire.

Kasim tried to pacify him. "This is the situation here, *appa*...our *jawans* told me... in this Ramapuram they don't even get a square meal a day...Vakkapalle is a better place...*appa!* Whatever you say, this is a punishment place.

"Let's see...let's see..."

The inspector came in and sat down in the chair.

Kasim sat down against a pillar on the veranda wondering what was in *appa's* mind. 'They say that this inspector has earned enough money to last a couple of generations. His family lives in the cooperative building in Cuddapah. He owns a couple of buildings. His children are studying well. Why should he want more....greedy fellow' Kasim was abusing Subbanna silently.

Subbanna was in the cool room. His limbs were feeling rather numb. During the past one week he hadn't kicked anyone. His hands couldn't grab even a *dammidi.*

Massaging his numb hands Subbanna thought, 'In the department the bastards think that Subbanna is capable of drawing oil even from the desert. But where is it? What do you get amidst these wild grass flowers on these mounds?'

At that moment Subbanna was full of anger against the Idwal mounds, the police station in Ramapuram, the lethargic people in that police jurisdiction, the SP who transferred him to these Sankaragiri area.

Subbanna was lost in his thoughts. His power and the money it could wield! Money! As he continued thinking, he remembered Dharmaraju Reddy...Brahmam Reddy. He called out to the constable. "Kasim!"

"*Appa!*"

"Do you think this village head, that Reddy is really a good fellow?"

"They call him a *Dharma Prabhuvu*, a generous person...he lives in that village next to that mound over there...I had been to his place a couple of times...he was very hospitable"

"The Karanam?"

"Karanams are the same everywhere. It doesn't work"

"This area doesn't have any big crime, I think." He wanted to confirm what he heard about this place before he came here.

"We don't even get petty cases here. Reddy, Karanam and the Munsif look after the cases of the three villages under their jurisdiction. They fine those who are in the wrong and put the money into the village corpus fund. They spend the entire money on Ramanavami celebrations, they told me."

"Then why did those sons of ...white people build this police station here." Subbanna ranted. He was angry that instead of building a police station in places where there are village parties in the district they had built one in such a place.

"It's a big punishment place!" Kasim mumbled again.

"Why do you say again and again this is a punishment place? You have learnt so much, why can't you put your mind in booking some cases?"

Kasim didn't talk back to *appa*. Already in Subbanna's mind a strategy was ready to draw oil in the desert.

The Ramapuram Reddy befriended Brahmam Reddy and the Karanam. He convinced them that in some major cases it's proper to involve police station. On the throne of justice

from now on the police station too could sit. Subbanna also cultivated other friendships in other villages in his jurisdiction.

Everything was ok. But even during the big famine that the villages faced that year, not many violations of law took place. No village in his jurisdiction reported cases of women committing suicide or drowning in some well. No feuds were reported at the station. They couldn't even get cases of arrack. In some petty cases the station could grab just a hen or a dog. Subbanna felt as if in his entire career he faced a drought.

Meanwhile the almanac had changed. In the new year the monsoon was heavy. Showers of hope brought coolness into the dry lives of farmers and farm hands. The lake was full. There was a bustle in the fields. With hope in their eyes, they seemed to have forgotten the two years of famine. Somayya was one of them.

There were movements of hoes in the fields.

Somayya's family had gone to the fields in the high land.

That day Somayya was tilling the wetland beside the lake. He had finished a couple of rounds.

Sub inspector Subbanna, three policemen, Reddy and Karanam approached his land. They looked at the bunds for a while. Though he noticed it, Somayya did not bother about it and was busy driving his bullocks in the field.

When he saw them getting into his field and coming close to him his heart was filled with apprehension. He dropped the stick in his hand and stopped the bullocks.

Reddy started talking accusingly. "What has come over you? You have never done anything wrong in all these years. Now whatever problems you're facing, why should you plant opium in your fields?"

"What? What are you talking about Brahmam Reddy?" he said looking at Subbanna the sub-inspector.

"I thought everyone in your village is innocent. I've been here for seven or eight months. There was not a single case registered in the police station. When I was to come here they told me that the village head is very generous and that there won't be a single case brought to the station. But there are people who can cheat even a person like you. That's the reason the government wants police stations. What should I do, tell me...I'll register the case...this is a big case." The sub-inspector said meaningfully.

Reddy couldn't believe all these. He couldn't see any link between Somayya's innocence and the opium plants he had seen planted on one side of his field. Apart from sending a man who has the responsibility of a family to prison, what would happen to his own authority as the head of the village?

"Yes Karanam, tell me what should I do." He said.

"What can I say? Somehow protect Somayya. If he goes to the jail what will survive will be only his clothes." Said the Karanam.

At that moment he remembered the money he could make when Somayya took some loan from the bank against his Idwelu land and felt something like pity for the old man.

Somayya was confused at their words.

"What's this talk about opium seeds...in my field? What's all this?"

Constable Kasim said caustically, 'You come and see for yourself...the opium smell of your field is all over the village."

Somayya walked up to the edge of the field, looked at the opium plants which he had never seen before, walked back

to the place where they were, collapsed with his hands on his head. Kasim's heart melted at the plight of Somayya. But what about *appa?*

"Don't register a case...somehow manage...he's a good fellow," Brahmam Reddy urged with sub-inspector Subbanna.

Karanam called Subbanna aside and whispered something to him. Then he went close to Somayya and said in a compromising tone, "No case, and no discussion in the village *Panchayat.* It's a shame for all of us Somayya. Pay a fine of five hundred rupees. It'll be ok. Hundred for the corpus fund and four hundred for the station."

Somayya stared at them as if he had gone crazy.

Justice Brahmam Reddy took pity at Sommayya's plight and intervened. "Karanamayya, don't punish him too severely. He's done it unknowingly. He'll pay fifty rupees for the corpus and two hundred for the station. Even that he doen't have. I'll pay for him. Ok Somayya you can repay it when your crop yields...let him go with that."

Subbanna said cunningly, "If you act so generously in such big cases it is a problem for us. We have to yield. People don't stop doing wrong in spite of such good people like you."

'He had never seen opium in his field! How did it grow in his field? Somebody must have grown it there and Somayya is paying for it. Are we doing injustice to him?' Brahmam was in a dilemma. He was not very happy at Subbanna's praises.

"Ok, let's go. Let us forget this here. Somayya! I'll take care of the payment. Don't talk about this with your family and make them unhappy."

All of them walked away from there. As they walked away, "Poor fellow, he's good" said Reddy.

"Yes sir, he looked a good fellow" said Kasim. Somayya stood up slowly.

Inspector Subbanna went back as if he forgot something. Somayya didn't look at Subbanna but was looking at the bullock on the left of the yoke. Subbanna laughed wryly and said, "That day when I asked for one bag of sorghum you refused me. Now look what has happened? Do you understand at least now that you shouldn't displease the police?"

Subbanna didn't tell him that he had planted the opium seeds himself. Somayya looked at Subbanna, took the thorn-stick. He started beating the bullock on the left, "The sky doesn't let us live nor do these men. You...you... you should be beaten with a thick stick..." he started abusing.

Subbanna understood Somayya's anguish and was flabbergasted. For a minute he was overcome by a cowardly thought. He hastened towards his fellow men of justice thinking, 'suppose the day comes when that thorn-stick beats me...why should it...when should it...suppose?'

Thirst

In all the sixty years of my life I have worshipped beauty as much as I could. I have faith in the good in the world. I believe that 'friendship is the sweetest thing in creation'.

I like beautiful evenings. I love flowers which reminded me of the beauty of youthfulness. Several other things of Nature excite me even now. I have great faith in the goodness in human beings. Friendship is something I have always cherished.

I had joined the Taluka office as an attendant and had risen to the level of a Deputy Tasildar by the time I retired from service. Even when I was an attendant I used to take flowers for my wife everyday. Even when I became the Deputy Tasildar my wife never had to ask the peons to get her flowers.

She's very beautiful.

In my career I had never accepted bribes. My daughter was born and after that we didn't have any more children. Therefore my salary was enough for us 'and we could also save a little. I could afford to lend money to friends. My house was always lively with visitors.

Ten years ago, though I was very reluctant, my boss the Tasildar made me buy along with some friends a five acre uncultivated land at the government rate in my wife's name.

The five acres turned my fortune. But I had not changed in my convictions.

The town expanded. The value of the land in my wife's name went up. I was not greedy and turned it into plots and sold them. I got a profit of more than one lakh rupees. I built a beautiful house in a village close to the town. I grew many flower beds and fruit trees in my compound.

In fact, my thirst for beauty which was under control started increasing. I bought some land in that village.

I got a well dug there with the help of my farmer friend Ganganna and fixed a motor to it. The entire appearance of the land changed. The tamarind groves transformed into sugar cane fields and regular patches of paddy.

I have been friendly with the farmers and have been lending them money whenever they needed. Of late the desire to expand my landed property and enhance my capacity to help others increased.

With a personality of the kind I have, how could I like those who know only the ugliness and meanness? Still, I try to be friendly and do good even to them.

With that attitude I tolerated Somasekhar all these days. Perhaps in all my life I had never put up with people as I have done with Somasekhar. I have never come across a person stranger than him.

For the last one week it has become impossible for me to put up with his friendship and to be good to him.

When I remember Somasekhar's views I go crazy. I get nightmares when I understand the principles behind his views.

Somasekhar is the son of my farmer neighbour. He is unemployed with an MA degree. These days nobody gets jobs easily. I liked his education and demeanour. I could see my grandson in him. I befriended him unmindful of the age difference between us.

Every evening we used to go for walks along the village lanes. During our walks I used to discuss beauty, goodness, friendship and such topics with him. I used to tell him that even if one had no money one should value these in life to be called a human being. I used to take my own life as an example. While listening to me he used to look at me quizzically as if I were an innocent bird.

For instance, the day we got to know each other, as we were walking along a road in the village, I was looking at the luxurious growth of flowers on either side of the road while enjoying the cool evening breeze. I was taking the pleasure of the russet hues of the western sky. Somasekhar was gathering the thorns lying on the road and throwing them aside. It may be alright to remove the thorns on the road. But what was he doing by throwing them into the flower beds, if not violating beauty?

Another day, in the evening, we were sitting under the banyan tree on the left side of the road, close to my land. All around us were the scattered motifs created by the moonlight filtered through the banyan leaves. On the other side of the road was the youthful paddy crop nodding its head in the cool moonlit breeze. Beyond that was healthily growing sugar cane field. At a distance, from the tamarind grove came the sound of crickets. In the bushes on the other side of the road glow worms looked as if they were flowers scattered by the breeze. The power grid a mile away lighted up the sky as far as one could see. Beside the plots of fields was the music of the quietly flowing stream. In the water-filled- fields the croaking of the frogs….

"The atmosphere is very nice" Somasekhar's words gave me a jolt. Was it Somasekhar speaking! I looked at him.

"If there's plenty of power and water, everything looks green" he spoke like a preacher.

Before I opened my mouth to speak, "Ganganna's sugarcane field looks green. Hope his troubles will be over

this year at least" he said his third valuable sentence and was silent.

I wondered if there was some appreciation for me in those three sentences. The land there came under cultivation because of me. The village got its power because of me. Water flowed in the village because of me. It is still flowing. The greenness is because of me. Ganganna's sugarcane field is growing because of me. Ganganna helped me a lot in buying the land and in cultivating it. I am good to him in leasing out to him five *kuntas* of land adjacent to mine. As there is no water there I am pumping out water from my well into his for a small price.

I was sure that Somasekhar was appreciating me.

We couldn't meet for the next ten days. My daughter, son-in-law and the children came to see me. I was busy with them and also with Ganganna's dispute for the next eight days.

Ganganna and his son couldn't get on. Both of them came to me for mediation. The entire property was the five *kuntas* of land. After paying me back what would be left of it for them, asked Ganganna. Ganganna's son wanted for himself whatever was left. My son-in-law offered to mediate. He convinced them that it's good for them to sell the land to me. After deducting the dues I paid them a thousand rupees each and settled the matter. In fact if we stick to the situation, prices, and the going rates of interest in the village Ganganna and his son would be left with nothing. I was sure that justice was done to Ganganna because of my friendship for Ganganna and also because of my innate goodness.

I think it was the day after the incident; I met Somasekhar in the morning.

I was sitting on a cot under the tamarind tree in my garden. It's my favourite place. It's a two hundred yard area, all around were tamarind trees full of tamarind, in the

middle was the sugarcane crusher; all around it was my land, looking quite spacious with the addition of Ganganna's land; looking very beautiful.

Somasekhar was going along the bund in the fields towards the village. I called out to him. He came to me. I asked him to have a seat. Instead of sitting next to me on the cot he sat on the heap of molasses in front of me. It was obvious that he didn't have any sense of beauty.

I explained to him all those difficulties I had encountered for the last ten days. He listened to me quietly and smiled.

"Shall we have some sugarcane juice? It will taste very good if we mix a couple of chillies in it."

"Yes, like good mixed with bad; like friendship with selfishness, it'll be nice." Said Somasekhar.

I couldn't understand his wit. I felt something pricking me. I couldn't laugh.

I called out to a farm hand and asked him to cut a couple of sugarcane stalks from Ganganna's field. Along with it I asked him to bring a couple of chillies. I regretted referring to it as 'Ganganna's field'. Hadn't it become mine now? Perhaps because of my friendship with Ganganna my heart reacted so.

He brought a few well-grown, straight sugarcanes and cut the two edges, and kept them in front of me.

I switched the motor on and crushed the sugarcane myself, taking care to keep the chillies in between the canes and extracted the juice. I noticed Somasekar keenly observing me doing it and smiled to myself. I thought something was wrong with him.

I strained the juice with a clean, white mull cloth and handed a glass over to him.

"You have it" he said.

I insisted that he should have it.

He took the glass into his hands.

I want to build a compound around this sixty *kuntas* of land and want to turn it into a beautiful *nandanavanam.* With Ganganna's land joining ours it has become a perfect square plot. I'll plant coconuts in five *kuntas,* in two *kuntas,* a variety of flowers...amidst them, with friends...." I was about to tell him enthusiastically.

Somasekhar kept the glass down and said, "That's why you have usurped Ganganna's land".

Usurp? I didn't like the word at all.

I explained in detail how I showed my generosity and friendship towards Ganganna in the matter of the five *kuntas.*

He listened and said, 'I don't know anything about your love for beauty, generosity, and friendliness. Water, power and money are in your hands. That's why Ganganna's family is on the streets now. When you strike, more families will be on the streets.' Somasekhar got up and left.

The sugarcane juice I was drinking tasted too hot. I felt giddy with his words. I felt scared to think of Somasekhar's views and his values.

Did I throw Ganganna's family on to the streets? Why would I?

I felt more thirsty.

The sugarcane juice was hot!

Of late I have been getting nightmares of water, power, and money.

Last night, in the dream:

Ganganna got electric shock and was screaming. His son was in the water. Amidst heaps of currency notes my daughter, son-in-law, their children and me. I switched on the sugarcane crusher. The sugarcane changed into human beings and from the crusher came out, not juice but blood! What's this? My mouth is going dry. Thirst...thirst...Somasekhar is on my chest! Oh! My heart is aching....the entire village is on my chest!

Dark Veins and Bright Blood

Rami Reddy started walking towards his fields in the evening. He was walking amidst the paddy crop looking around the unhindered view of his vast ninety-acre wet land.

The breeze carried a mixed smell of fertile soil, water and urea. The paddy crop in their square bunds looked like green silk saris spread out to dry in the breeze.

Whatever be the smell in the breeze, the sound of the cool breeze reminded Rami Reddy of the rustling of new currency notes. The crop looked charming like his wife in the newly wedded days. It looked flawless like his contented family life.

Rami Reddy came and stood beside Pullanna who was bundling up the sheaves of paddy. With his fifty-year experienced hands Pullanna was mechanically tying up the sheaves. Rami Reddy couldn't but appreciate Pullanna's efficiency and dedication to work.

"It would be so good if everyone worked hard like you. These days it's hard to find people who work honestly."

Pullanna was engrossed in his work and didn't respond.

"Ok, who's working at the betel leaves groves?" asked Rami Reddy.

"I think Thalari Venkanna's son Tirupathayya is working there, *saami*"

"He's ok; though he has studied upto tenth class he's loyal like his father." Rami Reddy thought about those who worked at his house and his farms as he walked towards the green fields.

None of those who worked under him was disobedient. They worked honestly. His word was command for them. Even in the matter of wages. In fact, Pulligadu had been with him as a farmhand for the last fifty years. After he had taken over charge he had been giving him one basketful for the first crop, and twenty five *seres* of paddy for the second crop over and above taking care of his food and daily expenses. He never said a word about the accounts. Whenever Pulligadu needed he had been helping him with petty cash, and he had been working for him. Not only Pulligadu, it was the same with all the others.

Rami Reddy came to the charity house, and his father's memorial structure. Looking up he thought, 'There's about an hour and half for lighting the lamp at the memorial. He had forgotten to check if there's oil in the lamp. He could send the fellow, Tirupathi , to get some...'

Immersed in his thoughts about his father he was about to enter the structure when he heard sounds of bangles and some male and female voices and laughter.

In a split second he felt as if all his beliefs, morals, and fairness were crashed on the ground. He felt that some terrible thing which never ever happened in all his life was going to happen there near his father's memorial. His blood pressure went up.

Even before any sound escaped him, he saw Tirupathayya and some girl coming out of the structure. The girl was tying up her hair and smoothening out her sari.

Catching sight of Rami Reddy Tirupathayya's heart was in his mouth. That's it, he didn't stop there a minute. He started running across the fields.

"*Thu*...coward..."

Rami Reddy looked at the girl as she said it softly. The girl was fair, slim and tall. She looked like a whiff of flame in her soiled ash-colour sari. She looked into Rami Reddy's eyes. Rami Raddy looked away. She started walking away slowly as if nothing had happened.

Rami Reddy was overcome with revulsion, fury and indignation.

"Stop!"

The fair girl stopped and looked back at Rami Reddy. If Rami Reddy could hit women at that moment that fair gild would have dropped dead. He looked at her as if she were a worm and asked, "who are you?"

"I'm Mallamma's daughter, Subbulu."

"Which Mallamma?" Rami Reddy was about to ask her when someone passed by. Rami Reddy hesitated and Subbulu walked away.

Sitting on the stoep of the charity building Rami Reddy felt miserable. He thought Tirupathayya was a good fellow, but he was so bold... that too in the memorial...

Rami Reddy couldn't think further. If it had happened twenty five years ago he would have chased him and broken his legs.

'The days are not really ours. He should bring him to the books and fine him. He should make him work for him for no wages for a couple of years. Immoral bastard,' he thought.

Because of these petty people he was getting into abusing. He should control his tongue. His thoughts were in his control. One's tongue and mind are one's enemies, said 'Baba'.

Rami Reddy reached his palatial house.

He called Venkayya and told him to ask everyone else to leave the place. Talari Venkayya was scared. If he wanted to see somebody alone, it meant danger. Venkayya remembered his son's words in the evening.

"Nayana, I'm going away to town. I may not come back for some time. If Peddi Reddy catches me now I don't know what he would do..." and he left.

He didn't tell him what wrong he did.

Venkayya stood before Rami Reddy feeling apprehensive. Rami Reddy, the village Munsif, sat cross-legged on his seat of justice and spoke deliberately.

"*Orey* Venkadu! You've been here for so many years. I'm the village head and you're a farmhand. You know me. Have I ever chased a woman before I got married? I have so much property. The property will last four generations. If I want can't I get the woman I want? But that's not right. It's not the way of the Reddy family. My father was like Lord Sri Rama Chandra – bound by one word and bound to one woman. So am I. Even after my marriage I have not looked at any woman other than Reddyamma. Things are different now. But have you ever seen in the past any flippant behaviour of men and women in my presence during the season of plantation, cutting and shredding leaves? In fact as they say perhaps I was born a misfit in this world. I hate drinking. Have you ever seen anyone coming before me drunk? My sons are grown up and are in good positions now. The eldest one is professor in a Medical College. The second one is a DEO. The third one is an Executive Officer in the Temple. The fourth son is a doctor... all of them are married. They have children. Have they ever smoked a cigarette in my presence? In fact, have they ever misbehaved with anyone when they were young and in college? ...Today, your son, in front of my eyes....that too in the charity house...in the charity house where my father's memorial structure stands....with a girl...he'll face consequences...but

I won't forgive him his wrongdoing. I'm not calling the *panchayat* for justice because of you...I'd punish him with cancellation of his wages for two years...What do you say? Do you want me to call the *panchayat?*"

After he listened to Reddy, Venkayya said tearfully, "Is that what the fellow has done. I wondered what it was... he has fled the village."

Rami Reddy felt happy at that but regretted that the fellow escaped the punishment.

"Ok, whatever happened has happened. Wherever he is call him back. He cannot escape the punishment. Who was that arrogant girl? Some Mallamma's daughter! Which Mallamma?"

"The Mallamma of the *peta,* town. She lives in the *madiga* settlement. She comes to work for us. That woman."

"Oh, that foul mouthed woman who always talks her head off? Why should we bother about her? If the man has morals what would a woman do? You go home now."

Talari Venkadu thanked his stars as he walked out.

Rami Reddy's thoughts wandered to Peta Mallamma.

Once he was talking with his younger brother near his fields. The farmhands were busy planting the saplings. Peta Mallamma came late. His younger brother abused her in his usual style "you mother of a ..." He didn't know such abusive language and didn't like it, so he was walking away from that place. He could hear her retort, 'why do you want my mother...I'll do for you...*che*...such a shameless woman...her daughter....her red lips and all... it's useless to meddle with her....but he should wait for the right time...of late these *madigas* are becoming too arrogant...except a couple of them like Pulligadu...

Rami Reddy tried to forgive Subbulu that day.

Two months passed. Tirupathayya was still absconding. Not knowing how to punish Talari Venkayya, he increased the interest rate for the amount Venkayya borrowed from him. Venkayya didn't speak a word.

It was a moonlit night. In the moonlight the village head Rami Reddy's house shone like a house of gems amidst a sea. On the veranda he was seated luxuriously on the stoep lost in thought of graphs of the interest rates, houses, villages, men and manners and other miscellaneous things. At a distance Pullanna sat on his haunches on the floor, waiting anxiously since half an hour for Reddy to take cognisance of him.

Rami Reddy came out of his reverie and looked at Pullanna. "*Eera,* have you had your food..?"

"Yes *saami*..."

"Well?"

"I need about five hundreds *saami*" Pullanna asked hesitantly as if he was doing something wrong.

"Why?" Rami Reddy said and started sermonising. "*Orey,* why are you always after money? Should I always be giving you money as fodder to the oxen? You need money always. What's the big need now?"

"The girl and the boy are getting married, *saami*"

"Have you fixed the groom and the bride?"

"I'm marrying off the girl to Vakkuri Narsimmulu's son, and for the boy I've fixed a match with Mallamma's daughter Yerrasubbulu."

The moment he mentioned Mallamma's daughter Yerrasubbulu he remembered the incident of the charity house. He was a little harsh when he said, "Are you sure of the consequences?"

Pullanna tried to dodge the question, "These things are common in our families, *saami.* The boy has his heart on her."

When he heard Pullanna's answer Rami Reddy thought, 'petty people, why bother about them. It's enough if they are useful to him.'

"*Saami*"

"*Year*"

"If you could settle the account....and give me five hundred..."

"I don't have anything of yours. On the other hand you owe me another thousand rupees or so. Since you're loyal to me I'm not talking about it. How much more do you want from me? All the petty farmers in the village keep pestering me for money. You're lucky, nobody pesters you for money."

`Pullanna felt as if he got a kick in the stomach at the words. His daughter-in-law looked into all the accounts and told him that Reddy owes him more than a thousand rupees. His little knowledge didn't allow him to understand credits, debits and balance. He almost asked for the account, but couldn't summon up enough courage. Pullanna pleaded weakly. "Have I ever asked you for any kind of account, *saami*? We live on your kindness. If you refuse to give the girl's marriage will be stopped. I've been telling people that with your generosity my children will be married off, *saami*."

"Is it only my kindness? Your son is working for my brother. How much have you extracted from him on the same pretext?"

"Sinna Reddy has promised three hundred, I think, *saami*"

"You take advance from everyone and then spread news that we make you work without wages!"

Pullanna couldn't understand who Reddy was angry with.

"Our lives should end at your feet, *saami*" he said.

"I'll add it to your account, take it tomorrow."

Pullanna got up and walked towards his house. As he walked back he thought, '*Che,* what he thought would happen and what actually transpired had nothing in common. For the last three years the account about the farm work never came to light. Nor could he ask about it. Wretched life...'

Looking at Pullanna walking away Rami Reddy thought, 'if his younger brother had not given him money he could have quietly dragged Pulligadu's son into my own workforce. Honest bastards...Would this fellow survive more than three or four years?...While this fellow is alive it would be safe to get his son into his service...he would have been bound...'

Suppose he asked for the account? The thought made Rami Reddy laugh to himself. Where are the documents? Everything was oral.

As Pullanna entered home his son asked what happened. Pullanna began saying, "Generous man, he said he'll give..." and narrated the details.

"Ok" said Pullanna's son. Beside him, picking lice on Pullanna's sister's head, Subbulu spat out, "*thu...*"

Both father and son looked at her.

"You are fortunate that it's only a three-year-account. What did he say you owe him? With the money he'd give you now what would be the balance?"

"I didn't ask him"

Subbulu spat out again, "*thu*...". For both father and son Subbulu's '*thu*...' was an insult.

Pullanna's son, her fiancé said roughly, 'Looking for lice, I too can say '*thu*...' Talk to the village head and you'd know."

Yerrasubbulu laughed. She picked out a louse and crushing it between her nails, she asked, "Why, if you ask would they behead you?"

"All the farmers support him, do you know that?" said Subbulu's fiancé.

"Who do we side with?" asked Subbulu.

"Ok, I'll ask him tomorrow morning to settle the account first and then start an account afresh."

Subbulu looked at her fiancé in appreciation.

Subbulu commented about her father-in-law-to-be and husband-to-be. "So far you never had any documents. Everything was oral. Would the villagers support the village head or would they listen to our woeful voices?"

"What should we do? Suggest to us. You're the one who has come from a town."

"First you should ask him to account for the grains he had to give you for the three years. He should tell you how much you have withdrawn and then deduct it from the total. Meanwhile we the women have been thinking of asking for a raise in the wages. You talk about the rest like you. It's he who objects for everything in the village. Godlike person. If he agrees all the other farmers would agree too. But this man wouldn't give in that easily nor would he say he disagrees. He scuttles the issue cleverly, Nagamma told me the other day. Whenever he was asked to raise the wages by one fourth of a rupee he would say, '*Orey*, what you ask for is your right. People like me and other rich farmers have no

problem in raising a *pavala* or so. But there are so many farmers in the village. Can all of them afford to do so? If they do, no problem. But what's wrong with you? Don't we help you whenever you need, for marriages, deaths, and other times? Ok, as you say we would raise wages. But you shouldn't ask for a single drop apart from it.' As they say, 'the priest knows the god well enough' similarly he knows us very well...let's see what happens to both father and son tomorrow."

Subbulu walked off. Looking at Subbulu in her red sari walking away in the moonlight, "She has been telling me this for some time now," said her fiancé.

"Very clever girl. After all, she comes from a town." Appreciated her father-in-law-to-be.

Throughout the night, even in their dreams Pullanna and his son tried to muster enough courage.

Early next morning both of them went to Rami Reddy's house. Father looked at the son and the son looked at the father.

After taking what Rami Reddy gave him, the son asked him with downcast eyes, "Please let us know the entire account *saami*! It's three years now." At first Rami Reddy was taken aback. Then he said sharply, "So after all these years you want me to tell you the account. Which son of a... taught you this? By the way, have you been working with me, or has your father?"

"It's me *saami*, who'll teach us *saami*?" mumbled Pullanna.

"Isn't it good to know it *saami*?" said Pullanna's son Obulesu.

"Ok, it's good as you say. Let me give you the account immediately. Show it to the entire village, but give back the money first."

Pullanna immediately gave back the money to Rami Reddy.

In about an hour he handed over a long piece of paper to them and said, "the debt turned out to be fifteen hundred rupees. Ask your father to stop working for me after he returns the money. You too return the money you owe to my brother and stop working for him. If you talk further you'll have your bones broken..."

Rami Reddy went inside his home.

The father and son didn't know what to do. Pullanna mumbled, "This is what happens if you listen to women."

Obulesu looked daggers at his father and said, "We've been listening to you right from our childhood. Have we earned enough? Let's ask Subbulu to look at the paper."

The education Subbulu had was not enough to read the illegible writing of Rami Reddy. She read slowly. She couldn't understand when they took the advances. There were no details about why they took them.

Subbulu said to Pullanna unemotionally, "Mama, you won't lose more than this. First you stop working, I suggest. Let me show the paper to our people in the town. Then let's see what will happen."

The entire village came to know that Pullanna had stopped working for Rami Reddy. Subbulu somehow managed Pullanna's daughter's marriage. Subbulu became Obulesu's wife. Rami Reddy's brother fired Pullanna's son. Meanwhile the labourers insisted that unless the wages were increased they wouldn't lay their hands on the sickles.

There was a continuous drizzle, and in the fields were ripe crops. Suppose it rained? The farmers became anxious. The rich farmers consulted Rami Reddy.

Rami Reddy and the village elders called the labourers to the open place in the village. It became known that it was all YerraSubbulu's leadership and there was a lot of hullabaloo behind the affair.

Rami Reddy was furious. As soon as he saw Subbulu his blood pressure rose up. He shouted at her: "Isn't it enough that you were spoilt? You have started spoiling the whole village. Evil bitch...The other day you were with Tirupatayya. Now you have hooked Obulesu. You have no morals... why do you meddle with these affairs?"

The village elders never knew Rami Reddy getting so angry any time. They were looking at Rami Reddy in surprise. The farm hands were looking at Subbulu. Some were nervous, some were curious, and some others were boiling with anger at Rami Reddy.

Subbulu snapped:

"Ok, I'm sullied. Ask Reddyamma to get sullied, ask all the wives of the farmers to get sullied. Ask all these people to get sullied. If I am sullied it's my problem. Nobody will be affected. What about you? You are a very good person. You don't look at women, you don't touch liquor, you don't smoke *beedis*, but you destroy everybody – with your sweet talk, false accounts. All these farmers emulate you. They make our lives miserable. You have made my Pullanna mama slave for you. He didn't ask you for the money as he thought it would come in handy for the girl's marriage. Not even giving him a grain, you handed him a *pavala* and showed him a debt of hundreds of rupees. Nobody questions you. For the last ten years, have you raised the wages at least once? Has your income gone down that you haven't raised the wages...?"

The blood pressure in the dark veins in Rami Reddy rose up. The big and small farmers started thinking at that moment that each of them was a Rami Reddy. It was pitch dark in the rich farmers' blood. In petty farmers' blood it was slightly dark. But there was Rami Reddy in every one of

them. Brahmam Reddy. Brahmam Reddy Darkness spread in the village square!

The women farm hands and the other labourers who came with Subbulu felt happy that she was voicing their thoughts. Obulesu was ready for anything. But he was nervous. But then, there was some brightness in their blood...the brightness started spreading...in all the farmhands there was YerraSubbulu! The village square was filled with darkness!

Distance

I was in the college staff room correcting the composition assignment I had given the students on the topic 'Freedom of Expression'.

There's nothing that cannot be killed in a composition. Sick language! Parroting views! In a few days, whatever might become of their language, it's sure that with all the amount of corrections I'd been doing, I would get confused about the right as wrong and wrong as right, and my language would be killed! I would get confused if I had taught in the class what they had written in the notebook, and would end up as a useless, weak person.

In the morning, in the first period I taught the *Aranya parvam* of Nannayya. In the third period I taught the play *Telugu Velugu*. Whether they learn Nannayya or listen to *Telugu Velugu*, their language would remain the same...

I was correcting...this fellow also was parroting! 'Freedom of expression means people in a government, in a society; in every way freedom of expression for a person is called freedom of expression.' Two subjects and what I had been subjected to! This action was inevitable, I had to correct. Part time college lecturer means...there is no stress in freedom....I scribbled with vengeance.

It was over.

Now, in the last period, it was the composition class 'Planning and National Progress'. I was imagining planning and the progress of the nation.

"*Saab*, telegram!"

I received the telegram with trepidation in my heart.

'Ramachandra serious start immediately to Kalahasti'. It was my friend Siva Reddy's telegram! I felt disturbed.

Dear friend Ramachandra had been in the Vellore hospital for three months with the problem of heart enlargement. He must be in his last moments fighting death or perhaps had already succumbed. I must go. That was the message of the telegram. I believed that people like me get telegrams with only unpleasant news, never pleasant ones. I couldn't bear such thoughts any longer.

I had received a letter from Yasodhara, 'We've admitted Ramachandra in the hospital at Vellore. He is missing you, do come.' I went to meet Ramachandra.

Though he was suffering, the first question he asked me was, 'Have you settled down somewhere? Are you through with your financial problems?'

I was ashamed to respond to it. Ramachandra said with pale smile, "All our problems will end only with our death. Look at me. Since a year this disease has not been letting me live or die. I have exhausted my medical leave. No salary. Yasodhara is also on leave, gets only half the pay. But for friends like you...." He couldn't complete his sentence. Siva Reddy was next to me. "Don't worry. Your health is more important" he said.

When he said 'friends like you', I did not know where to look. It was Siva Reddy, what did I do for Ramachandra? What help did I give him?

During our student days I had borrowed from him so many unrequited amounts. In fact, last year when I wrote to him from Hyderabad he sent me two hundred rupees. I remembered that. I remembered how I had to encounter so many difficulties to go and meet him at Vellore. I had no money, but I managed it. I had no leave, as every day was

a working day for me, yet I lost ten days of work to be there. I hated my helplessness to offer support in his days of difficulty.

"I'll be back in another week or ten days. Don't worry. Ask Yasodhara to write to me if she needs anything. I've spoken to the doctors. I'll go to Nellore from Madras. I'll see you later. By the way, Yasodhara is coming here tonight." Said Siva Reddy.

I was moved by the gratitude I saw in Ramachandra's eyes for Siva Reddy.

As he was leaving, Siva Reddy told me, "If possible why don't you stay back? What do you have to do in the college, that too in Hyderabad? Don't worry about money."

I didn't like the way he said it. I never liked him. Nor did he like my attitude. But because of Ramachandra, our friendship continued. I couldn't retort him under those circumstances and said, "In Hyderabad my wife's all alone. I'll leave tomorrow after Yasodhara comes." In fact Siva Reddy must have thought that I had a permanent position in the college. I never shared my problems with him then, nor did I now.

He left.

Not knowing how to console him I said, "You'll surely get well soon"

"Doctors always say so till the end. But ask them to speak the truth."

I met the Chief and asked him. 'It was ok for another three or four months. Once the operation is successful he'll be alright,' the doctor assured. Since I knew his reputation I believed the doctor. I told Ramachandra that the operation will be successful.

When he heard me he said gently, "It's better to die than live like this. But what would happen to Yasodhara who rejected everybody to marry me?"

Though there was truth in his wild thought I assured him "we're there."

Today, this telegram! The operation must have failed. They must have taken Ramachandra to Kalahasti.

I couldn't concentrate on anything. The bell rang. It was the last bell for a class before we called it a day. I had to teach. I went into the class. 'Planning and National Progress' was the topic of the composition the students had to write that day. I was not sure what I spoke for about fifteen minutes. I was thinking of the telegram again and again. My words were confused. There was no link between sentences. I couldn't manage it any longer. I stopped speaking and asked them to write the composition. Somehow one hour passed. My duty was over.

I got paid six rupees for that class. The entire days earning was eighteen rupees. Total three classes. 'If only I had three classes everyday!' I thought. The telegram was playing in my mind.

I entered the staff room carrying about sixty composition note books. The staff room was empty. Everyone had left.

I reached the bus stop to go home. The Vidyanagar bound bus had not yet arrived. I had two rupees in my pocket. There could be some twenty five or thirty rupees at home. The telegram was haunting me.

'I have to go to Kalahasti, I must, I will' I thought.

On the other side of the bus stop a couple of friends were talking and bursting into laughter.

I remembered our friendship during our student days.

Ramachandra, Siva Reddy and me shared a room in the university hostel. Ramachandra and Siva Reddy were in the final year and I was in the Previous. Those days the elections were so exciting! Especially for Ramachandra and me.

Listening to our dreams Siva Reddy used to tease us, "Come down to earth. With your dreams you won't be worth even a *dammidi*!" He was right.

Ramachandra was in love with Yasodhara and married her. She was Ramachandra's classmate and a distant relative of mine. With that marriage she was disowned by her father. In fact, the circumstances in which he was, it was difficult for her father to get her married. When he could get an educated son-in-law so easily, his sentiments about caste irritated me. As he was my relative his brahminism and his sincerity were not unknown to me. But the wedding was not stopped. It was Siva Reddy who mainly bore the expenses. We the friends stood up to perform the marriage. There were no problems. Both of them got jobs as lecturers in a government college. In about a couple of years Ramachandra got into this condition of heart enlargement. I wondered if at least now Yasodhara's father reconciled with her.

Siva Reddy became an officer in the district. Got a lakh of rupees as dowry. He was leading a comfortable life in Nellore. He could afford to spend more money on friendship now. His attitude to friendship did not change either. But I didn't like one thing in him; he would talk about the money he spent on friends.

I lost four or five jobs due to my arrogance. I ran around a lot in Hyderabad to get this job. Meanwhile I got married. I got married to Varalakshmi, my uncle's daughter who was worse off than me. I had to behave myself now. For the past one year my earnings from my teaching in the private-body-managed college had been about three to four hundreds. In my leisure I always prayed that there shouldn't be any strikes and holidays for the college. I was living with a hope of getting some permanent job. The management had been giving me hopes.

Now, in the middle of the month, to go to Kalahasti I needed at least a hundred rupees. The distance between Hyderabad and Kalahasti was playing in my mind's eye.

It was a distance I couldn't walk.

It was a distance one could travel either on train or bus!

It was a distance which needed money to travel!

It was a distance of time and space between hearts close to each other!

I remembered the children's game 'How far, far away? Very, very far away'. My life with all its shortcomings had made the children's game seem true.

If I had a hundred and fifty, at least a hundred rupees, I would conquer time and space. I would cross them at least for the time being. I could reach Kalahasti the next morning. But where's the money? In this vast city I couldn't find someone who would give me some. I couldn't think of a way in which I could get two or three hundred rupees.

I started getting annoyed with myself and my job. I knew that only annoyance would not solve the problem, yet, I was annoyed.

The bus arrived. I got into the crowd; got my foot stamped, in turn I too stamped with vengeance and somehow made some space for myself in the bus. The conductor asked me to move forward. As I pushed myself ahead, I stamped a well-dressed fellow's foot with rancour. Luckily the youngman didn't say anything to me.

I could see the city from the running bus. The entire city looked like money to me, but I didn't have it with me.

I reached home.

"What's the matter?" asked Varalakshmi.

I handed the telegram to her.

"What happened, and to who?" she asked anxiously.

I told her about Ramachandra.

Varalakshmi was sympathetic. "It would be proper for you to visit them".

"No money" I said weakly.

"That's right. In any case, what's the use of anybody going there now?"

I was taken aback by her instantaneous reply. 'How quick she was in changing her stand' I thought. I knew that hidden in her words were a worldly wisdom and philosophy born out of helplessness. But I was angry with Varalaksmi, and I did not show it.

I wanted to ask her, 'suppose it was my father or yours, would you say what's the use of going there?' It's no use saying such things. She might point out my ineptitude. She might burst into a fit or blame my helplessness. A friend was not a relative. It is not wise to expand poverty. That could be the reason behind Varalakshmi's philosophising.

When I was despairing I got a ray of hope. I thought of Peter. Suppose I asked him for some money? I should, I should ask Peter who I hate.

He was my classmate in B.A at Andhra Loyola. Now he was a permanent lecturer in the college. His wife was also a lecturer. They were earning a lot. He might have some money. He was always careful with money. He was a son of an officer.

I suddenly got up to go. Varalakshmi looked at me and asked "Where are you going?" "Will be back in a minute" I said and left for Peter's place. Peter lived close by.

All along the way I was lost in thoughts, anxious, and hesitant; what would he say?

Peter was home. His wife Suguna was perhaps not home.

I explained to him, pleaded with him to help me with a couple of hundreds. My entreaties looked awkward to myself. It was humiliating, demeaning. That's why Peter, who I hated, looked all the more ugly to me. But I pleaded on.

Peter looked at me with surprise. "For the sake of a friend!" he said.

I affirmed. Whatever he thought of it, he said politely, "Sorry Sriram! I've got Christmas expenses to meet. I pity. But let me see..."

He went into another room. I was anxious that I might be disappointed, and if that happened what I should do.

I was relieved to see the ten rupee notes in his hands. He counted a hundred and fifty and put them into my hands and said, "you must return it on the first of next month. Suguna Peter's money. She is not home. I took it from her vanity bag. I will tell her that I lent it to you."

I would never forget in life the look in his eyes when he gave me the money, as if saying why should a fellow who has no money care for wretched bonds and useless sentiments. I daren't look into his eyes and even when he was asking me to count the money, I hastily pushed it into my pocket and thanked him. I asked him for a white paper, wrote a leave note and asked him hand it to my Head.

He agreed and took the liberty to say, "Don't take long, You'll lose classes."

I was glad at the advice he gave. 'Good, he stopped at that and didn't explicitly say that mine was daily wages and that I would lose money for so many hours' I thought. I nodded and came out.

Suguna Peter's money! Peter's money! What did it matter to me? It would conquer distance, cross the space, reach me to Kalahasti. I would be able to meet Ramachandra. That was what I wanted.

I gave Varalakshmi forty rupees. She seemed surprised at the influence I wielded, looked uncomfortable at my haste, but she didn't say anything other than, "don't take long" while taking the money.

I hurried up.

Without proper sleep, with painful thoughts, with hope that Ramachandra would live a few more days, with confused thoughts of consoling Yasodhara in case Ramachandra was already dead, I reached Kalahasti the next morning.

There was no hustle bustle in front of Ramachandra's house. My heart was pounding in my chest. I went into the house. In a corner there was Yasodhara, with her hands round her knees. Next to her was her mother with a sorrowful face. Ramachandra's daughter was sleeping innocently in her grandmother's lap. A few college students were sitting there in silence. Yasodhara's father was there on a cot .

I understood what had happened. I couldn't speak.

"Are you coming from Hyderabad?" I thought the question Yasodhara's father asked had a twist in it and didn't respond.

Yasodhara looked up. There was no vermillion mark on her forehead. She sobbed for a while. She silently listened to my words of consolation. Then she started weeping bitterly. The atmosphere was heartrending.

Yasodhara's father started giving details of the last moments of Ramachandra's life. He praised Siva Reddy.

"Siva Reddy is the real man. He is such a big officer, and when I think of all the trouble he took for his friend I feel like appreciating it. It was he who sent for us. I was foolish to be estranged from them all these days. Now, who else has

Yasodhara, but her own parents? What do her parents-in-law care? They came and went back yesterday."

I didn't find his words sincere. He said Yasodhara had nobody except them!

I couldn't take it any longer. "Ok, then" I said and got ready to leave. Yasodhara nodded in silence.

"Siva Reddy left for Nellore early in the morning. All of us knew that Ramachandra wouldn't get well. But on Siva Reddy's insistence we got him admitted to the hospital. He helped us with four or five thousand rupees. It's difficult in one lifetime to pay the debt of such good friends. My parents also came to help us in time." Said

Yasodhara and as she stopped, her father continued, "I'm sorry that we're troubling Siva Reddy a lot. He spoke to the principal about the ten thousand rupees, and promised to look into the pension papers too..."

Yasodhara was still weeping.

I was shattered.

I didn't know why I said, "To announce love one should have a status and intelligence."

I couldn't bear the look in the eyes of Yasodhara's father any longer and walked out.

I felt disturbed.

I must get into 'Nannayya', 'Telugu Velugu' 'Planning and National Progress' composition correction...I must be quick...into the world of six rupees an hour....

This is Your Own Country

When we went to look up the house, whatever shape the house was in, Usha was taken in by the six-seven- feet open space in front of the house.

If she prepared the place and planted a few saplings and flowerbeds the house would look beautiful, she thought. She spoke about it to her husband Chandramouli. Though he thought of it as 'thirst for beauty in the cramped rented world', he agreed to Usha's proposal.

For a few days, in the evenings whenever they had some time, they worked hard. The soil was reasonably done. It looked the plants wouldn't come up there unless they laid some new soil and manure. They needed at least thirty to forty baskets of it. On the other side of the road there was a mound which didn't seem to belong to anybody. Close to it was a heap of garbage and dung heap of the milkmaid Pala Subbamma. All that was needed was to get them here. Usha asked Pala Subbamma to send some labourer to do the job. "Who will come all the way for this petty work?" said Pala Subbamma.

The seeds for the flowerbeds were kept ready. The neighbours offered a couple of saplings. The mound of soil was lying in front of the house. Subbamma offered the necessary manure. Yet it was not possible to grow a garden.

That morning Chandramouli was looking through the window as he was writing a paper on 'child labour' for the seminar at Woman and Child Welfare Centre, on the occasion of the International Year for the Child.

Chandramouli was unhappy. He was thinking of the children he had come across every day in various contexts.

He thought of the unkempt children handing tea in the tea kiosks, the cleaner children looking like broken cups cleaning the cups in canteens, the breathless children jumping up and down pumping air into cycles in cycle shops, oil and grease stained children with spanners, screw drivers and soiled dusters in their little hands looking like worn out wheels, machine-like children wrapping up packets in the grocery, torn basket-like children in the white-stone grinding mills, children in clubs, bars, lodges with hope in their eyes, were in his thoughts. In the railway stations, bus stations, on the roads, in the shade of temples, in the light of the screen in cinema halls, in front of houses, wherever you saw, beggar children were moving about as if the country was not theirs. When he was young, the harijan boy who used to clean the cowshed of dung, refuse and garbage, then the rickshaw boy who came up to him saying 'get in *saar*, I'll take you', the puny fellow who stretched his hand after cleaning the railway compartment with a soiled cloth, the girl with lamps for eyes eagerly looking for the left-overs thrown away on the platform, were disturbing his thoughts. The neatly dressed children going to school as if going to some happy world, unaware of their future, were in front of his mind's eyes. He also remembered the children who were shouting in the streets demanding note-books and text books.

He was impatient and stopped writing.

"*Ammayya*, please give me some leftover!" cried the boy at the gate. Chandramouli saw the boy at the gate.

He might be ten years old but looked like an eight-year-old. He wore torn knickers below his navel. Perhaps there were no buttons in the fly. No shirt. His ribs were showing. In his hand was a small dented vessel. His hair was unkempt.

His face was greasy. If he had good food to eat and clothes to wear, he would look like any other boy in the neighbourhood.

He called again for the leftover food.

Chandramouli felt troubled.

He hadn't yet got used to such cries. He felt distressed whenever he encountered child poverty, whenever he couldn't escape it, whenever he felt helpless about it. As the sky was overcast for four days the station was full of beggars, Chandramouli watched them on his way to college; old women, mothers, children, abuses, rantings, cries, fights – he had been watching it all. He had been listening to the noises near his home.

The boy looked through the chinks in the gate and called again. "Go away!" Chandramouli said and went in.

Chandramouli got ready to go to college and came out. The boy was still waiting at the gate, looking at the house. He stepped aside when Chandramouli stretched his hand to open the gate. As he stepped into the street, he looked at the boy and his dented aluminium vessel. He stood by the side of the road and was slurping at the water soaked rice-grains from the vessel.

'Suppose he gave the boy the job of carrying the soil and manure and gave him some money...' thought Chandramouli. He felt guilty. 'He would collapse after carrying a couple of basketfuls', he thought with pity. He knew how to solve his problem. Inadvertently he took out a ten paisa coin from his pocket and handed it to him. Then he hastened away as a man chased by poverty.

As he was walking, he was thinking of the place such people's problem had in the academic world. He remembered the political situation which debated international politics and ignored to face local problems. He

too was conditioned to the limitations in all this chaos. He did not write an article on the local problem of child labour in his town but collected statistics of the third world countries and India. Everything was confined to statistics, and the statistics were not his either.

The Seminar was over. One more programme was added in the list of the Woman and Child Welfare Centre. Chandramouli didn't feel proud when everyone appreciated his paper. He didn't think it necessary to feel proud of what he didn't write from his experience.

He came home late that evening. He was surprised to see neatly planted saplings in the front yard. He thought that Usha must have employed some labourer to do the work.

As she served him tea Usha told him about her achievement of the day.

"It seems you gave a ten paisa coin to a boy – he did all this. He is from some village. Poor fellow he carried about thirty baskets of soil and manure. He left just a while ago. Oh! My shoulders are aching drawing water from the well!"

"Didn't you feel it was unjust making the small boy work so much?"

Usha expected him to appreciate her, instead, when he asked the question she felt disappointed. She said as anybody would have said, "So what? Is the world going on without any injustice?"

"The world can go on in spite of the injustice. You have to know some truths for that. You will go a long way if you travel in that direction."

"Which direction?"

"In the first place tell me how much did you pay him?"

"Does anyone pay cartloads? I gave him the leftover rice of the morning. I gave him the old slacks my brother forgot

in the suitcase. Even that's a lot these days. If he goes round the houses would he get anything more than a few grains along with the abuses of the housewives?"

"So, you didn't feed him well?"

"They look so emaciated but if you want to feed them to their full you have to cook a quarter kilo of rice again!"

Chandramouli remembered what he saw of the boy and asked, "Ok, did you feed him before he worked?"

"What kind of cross examination is this? If I fed him before the work could I make him work at all? Were you feeding the farmhands so in your village? Does the government give you your salary beforehand?"

"Don't talk so rashly. Did you give him at least some money?"

"Why?"

"Because you made him work for you."

"You are the limit. You talk as if I am heartless and you are the one with a lot of love and sympathy for the entire world!"

"I don't go about with that stamped on my face. He must have worked at least for four to five hours?"

"So what?"

"It's a three-rupee-worth of work. You could have given him at least that much!"

"The slacks I gave him didn't have a single tear on it. If I had given it to the woman who sells old clothes she'd have given five rupees for it. It's terry cot slacks!"

"You didn't sell it, did you?"

Usha was piqued at the series of questions Chandramouli was asking and his bantering. "Why should I? You speak as if I've looted like the Tatas and Birlas!"

Chandramouli smiled as he said, "It's not enough if you're good at the language."

Usha said mulishly, "I've learnt a lot in your company in these two years. I told him that if he works hard he wouldn't have to beg. You just watch tomorrow. He wouldn't go round the doorsteps begging."

Chandrmouli said in all seriousness, "He will beg. Even if people like you give him work he would run away. You too would realise it if you give a thought to it."

"Why? Arrogance? Insolence given by the food he begs from house to house? Yes, the entire brood is so!"

Usha couldn't control the fire that was raked by the argument. She felt insulted that her husband got into an argument about what she thought was insignificant.

Chandramouli was provoked. Though he was trying to calm down he realised that he had gone astray. He tried to explain to her. "What does his brood to do with it? Look here, Usha...what I'm trying to say is, just you and me alone cannot solve this problem. It's enough if we cultivate an attitude towards a solution to the problem. It will go a long way. Because he's a small fellow you could get away by making him work for you for four hours for a pair of slacks and some rice. You know very well that it would be a different story if it were some adult given the same work. It's not very good to deceive yourself that you were just. Look within yourself and think, you'll know the truth."

Usha didn't respond. She knew him but in this matter she was upset. She silently took a novel into her hands. In that world of the novel she didn't find such experiences, nor did the arguments split her ears.

Chandramouli flipped through the pages of some book impatiently. He was being haunted by his paper on child

labour. 'If I see him tomorrow I should put three rupees in his hands', he thought.

Next day, like the previous day, the boy was at the gate slurping the watery rice, calling out, "*amma*, please give me some rice."

Chandramouli was reading the newspaper then. Usha was going in and stopped with the vegetable basket in hand. She looked at her husband with curiosity.

"Come in, *babu*." Chandramouli called him in.

That's it! The boy ran away in a minute.

Chandramouli went up to the gate and said, "Here, I'll give you some money."As if a cruel animal was trying to lure him with a deceptive smile, the boy took to his heels along the road. He looked back just once. That's all!

Chandramouli laughed at his behaviour. Then, he couldn't bear the restless feeling in him and said to his wife, "Have you seen that, Usha? He has understood the kind of work we would give him. What is it that creates a lack of understanding about the value of work? Do you think it is right to fill the country with those who are not fully aware?

If the boy had on him at least the pair of slacks she had given him the previous day, Usha's generous heart would have got some satisfaction!

The 'Peeru' House

In front of the green neem tree was the old *peeru* house. The plaster had peeled off at places. The coating of white-wash done during the *peeru* festival was already becoming dull. The rafters covering the house were rotting and were ready to fall off any day. When the rats ran along the rafters thin pieces of rotten wood fell down. From the two strong rafters above, the *peeru* box hung. The small and big *peerus* which shone and walked on the live coal in a procession during the *peeru* festival were there in the box, looking forward to the next peeru festival.

Right under the *peeru* box, to a side Masthan sat alone on the low string cot feeding the champion rooster.

Holding the legs and wings of the cock between his thighs, he widened it's beaks with his left hand fingers; with his right hand he picked up fistfuls of tender millet and black gram from the small wicker-winnow kept on the side and he pried open the beaks and fed the rooster deftly, expertly and carefully, not letting the grains scatter and fall down. He took out the aluminium vessel tucked between the strings and poured a couple of mouthfuls of water into its throat. The cock tossed its neck, stroking its neck, he looked around the *peeru* house. He started talking to himself.

'your...mother ... in the Sankurathiri match with one jump and kick you must make the other cocks bite dust.. If you win the match like that I'll get you earrings...if things work out at least this *peeru* house should be repaired this year. If I get the prize money I'll get a new *peeru* made...eat well...your mother...'

Peeru = icons of Muslim saints

He opened the beak of the cock and took another fistful of grains from the basket. Masthan was unmindful of president Aswatha Reddy standing under the neem tree in front of the house and the few others who came along with him.

'Once these elections come, one has to go round all these sons of...'Aswatha Reddy was fuming within; he changed colour and spoke to Masthan pleasantly.

Masthan came into the world of men from the world of the cock. The emaciated man in torn vest and loin-cloth got up from the stringed cot in confusion and stood tall like a *peeru.* The released cock jumped into the wicker-winnow, spilling the grain on the ground, climbed the *peeru* box and crowed.

Masthan got angry that the half-rupee worth grain fell into dust.

"If there's anyone grooming prize cocks, it's Masthan."

At Aswatha Reddy's appreciation Masthan's anger disappeared. He ran to the hut opposite and brought a quilt from the stoep, spread it on the cot and said, "Please sit down"

None of the visitors sat down.

Someone in the group remarked wittily, "You're showing the cot to a whole crowd."

"All said and done, we Kapus cannot measure up to the hospitality of s*aibulu.*" Another praised him to the skies.

'You should have seen during his father Budensabu's time. Even the Bombay *seths* were terribly impressed. It was because they had incurred loss in the lemon business in the past because of falling prices, otherwise their family would be a match for us the farmers. If only there was a demand for lemons those days like it's now...?"

Aswatha Reddy stopped his song of praises of the Masthan family with a question mark.

"Coming to think of it now, compared to the other *saibulu*, Masthan is better off, doesn't budge from the *peeru* house." Another person sang along.

Masthan felt as if it was *peeru* festival. In that excitement he asked, "What's it Reddy, you've come with so many of them. What can I do for you?"

"We came here for your help. Assembly elections are approaching. This man is called Thummala Pulla Reddy. He has a number of buses and factories. He's my relative. He is contesting on behalf of the Janata. Because I'm with him all the farmers votes will be his. Where would the *mala*s and *madigas* go? If you help, all the votes of the *saibulu* in our village and the villages around will be his." Aswatha Reddy explained the reason for their visit.

Masthan felt happy.

He remembered Aswatha Reddy asking him to vote Indiramma during the Parliament elections and wondered why he was now asking him to vote Janata. He hesitated to give his word before he spoke to his people as that might lead to some problem. He told Aswatha Reddy so.

The candidate for the Assembly, Pulla Reddy said eagerly, "You're right. Decide this evening. You can come in our jeep in the morning. Is it possible to talk to them in the evening?"

Masthan said hesitatingly, "I'll talk in the evening"

Before leaving, Aswatha Reddy revealed only the first strategy that would bind people.

"Ok, speak to your people...all of you were asking for the repairs of the *peeru* house; villagers were also asking for it. I'm the panchayat president only for name sake. All of them are my relatives. I don't even have a place to pee in privacy.

If I want to collect house taxes it's not possible as nobody pays. Panchayat has no income. I pay the government's share and feed the panchayat officers from my pocket... it's ok...this time we'll bear the expenses. Tell your people. This very evening I'll send the *petromax* light to be placed in the house as my contribution. If there are no lights, someone might get tempted to pinch the *peerus* in the dark. *Peeru* festival is for all of us...in fact, if you say ok...your men would also agree with you."

Masthan nodded.

The election canvassers walked away with the thought that they had won the votes, to cast their nets elsewhere.

Masthan stretched himself on the cot and thought, 'after a long time the plat *peeru* house is going to see better days.' The cock perched on the *peeru* box crowed.

Aswatha Reddy kept his promise. The *petromax* light arrived that night. Once in a while it gasped. It had to be pumped and cleaned with a needle and shaken to keep it alive. In that light sat the old and young like unpolished *peerus.* On their faces, fatigued by day long toil there was listlessness. Nobody looked enthusiastic.

Masthan told them all about Aswatha Reddy's visit and his proposal. All of them felt that it was alright. But they were feeling uncomfortable that till recently they voted the symbol of 'a pair of bullocks' or 'cow'. In their lives they had no time or opportunity for soul searching. In fact they did not know how to say 'no' to Aswatha Reddy. If each one got some money it would be good. They hoped that just before the elections there would be some amount distributed. In this business some even felt jealous that Masthan would make some money for himself. Some feared trouble. If the president belonged to Janata party Reddy would definitely support the party of Indiramma. Nobody gave any definite word.

"*Yemarra*, decide quickly" Masthan prompted impatiently.

"What's there to decide, Asithu Reddy was the first one to ask us." Someone said.

"Yes, Reddy hasn't yet come "

"The land that belonged to the *peeru*, Reddy usurped it thirty years ago. During the presidential elections Asithu Reddy had given us word that he'd force Reddy give it back. We voted for him, but the land still is in Reddy's name." The old peeru Sailu mumbled.

He gave fifty rupees per house. What's the use of talking about the land? The land is registered in the name of Reddy. Let's at least retain the *peeru* house. A good rain is enough to bring down the house along with the *peerus*.

They thought Masthan's argument held water.

But somebody raised a doubt, "do you think we should put up the flags? Suppose the other party comes? All these days we have voted for Indiramma."

"If someone comes, it should be Reddy, but he won't come because we would talk about the '*peeru* land'. Asithu Reddy asked us first. All of us work for Asithu Reddy and his relatives. Moreover our people live only in five or six villages in the neighbourhood. It's not good to antagonise him. Though he looks mild when it's time for it he acts tough. Why invite trouble? If the other party approaches us we can say that Asithu Reddy approached us and we've already given him our word.

Nobody countered Masthan's argument. Old peeru Saibu said decisively, "whoever we vote, we should tell them that the *peeru* platform should be repaïred before the day of voting. Besides that if they offer us anything more, we can accept it."

All of them got up saying "*achchaa, achchaa*" As they walked away they thought how useless all this voting was as they had no escape from working hard every day.

At the *peeru* house there was still some kerosene left in the *petromax light* Aswatha Reddy had sent. Though it gasped once a while it still gave light. Masthan had his food and brought his son Vali along to the *peeru* house. As if had had achieved something that day, he started telling his son, "*Orey*, Vali! This house was built by our ancestors. I played here when I was a child. I listened to the *peeru* stories from the old *peeru saab nana* here in this house. During the *peeru* festival, painted as a tiger I did the tiger dance...it was fun those days. When your *dada* Budensaab had his business of lemons it was here that we heaped lemons and gathered them into sacks. When you were born, thirteen years ago, your a*bba* took all the orchards found around here on lease. We thought we would make at least a lakh. The stuff sent to Hubli, Bangalore and Bombay didn't even fetch the rail freight charges. With that we lost everything. Your *dada* died of grief, here in this house. From that time I decided not to get into business. This house proved lucky for cock-fights. Not a single cock of ours turned heels from the arena, nor was one killed. That's why I have such love for this house...it's getting repaired after such a long time...if our house leaks we can sleep here. You can read here in the nights...."

Vali couldn't understand why his father was telling him all this. He watched all that happened a while ago. He never bothered about his father who usually sat there in the *peeru* house with his cocks, except when Aswatha Reddy sent for him to trim the lemon trees or to pluck lemon crop. He liked his mother who worked hard to run the house. It was his mother who insisted that he should go to school. Now when he's in seventh class his father started taking interest in him. He has got close to his father now. Today all that interested Vali was the *petromax* light. His mind was full of

the light. After his father finished his narration he asked him only one question. "I'll read here everyday. Can we keep this light for ourselves?"

Though he liked his son's question, Masthan didn't know how he would meet the expenses for the kerosene. "It'll be with us *beta*!" he mumbled.

The next day Aswatha Reddy promised as Masthan wanted him to. In Masthan's presence he sent a worker to find out what are the repairs required for the platform and asked Masthan to climb the jeep.

In a week the flags fluttered at the cotton-cleaners' houses. Whether it was because of the support of Masthan's relatives or because of Aswatha Reddy's benevolence, flags fluttered at the cotton-cleaners' houses in the neighbouring villages too. The 'farmer-plough' symbol appeared on the faded walls of the huts.

As expected, Reddy who was on the side of the hand symbol was furious. He wanted to provoke the harijans, but they dodged him thinking 'anyway it's going to be Indiramma'. As the cotton-cleaners were always on the side of Aswatha Reddy, Reddy wanted to teach the petty people a lesson, especially the old and influential Masthan. He thought over the matter and caught hold of the tanner Tolla Kamal who once had a skirmish with Masthan over a cock-fight. Tolla Kamal was the only one who was even with Masthan in cock-fights. News spread that for the Sankranthi cock-fight Tolla Kamal was preparing his rooster to fight Masthan's rooster.

Aswatha Reddy visited Masthan one evening and sent for the elders to the *peeru* platform. "I'll back you up, whatever be the expenses, accept the challenge," he assured.

On Sankranti day the arena was prepared in the park in the outskirts of the village for the cock-fight. Stalls selling savouries and *karjikayalu* appeared at the venue. Pots of

arrack were brought in. Tins of liquor were stocked under trees. Bustle of the crowd, bragging and repartees filled the atmosphere.

There was no sign of the president and Reddy. They were away from the village seeking alibi. Their groups were ready to fight each other if necessary.

There were some casual fights to begin with. As soon as the roosters of Masthan and Tolla Kamal entered the arena there were shouts of "face it... ours is the Janata cock....do you have guts to face our Indiramma..." Terrible excitement all over, the stakes reached four thousand rupees.

With sharp knives tied to their legs, roosters of either party got into the arena.

"Jump! Cut! You mother of...!" shouts could be heard.

They jumped a couple of times. Both lost a couple of feathers. For the third jump both the cocks braced up and taking slow steps...That's all, somebody shouted, "There two jeeps of reserve police!" Everybody ran helter-skelter.

As Masthan tried get hold of his rooster the knife struck his hand and blood gushed out. He let go the rooster in fright and ran. He stumbled over some stone and fell down. There was a bullock cart nearby. The cart-driver was not there in the cart. The bullocks were frightened and started running. The wheels ran over Masthan's legs. Masthan shrieked, *"Amma, Arey ya Allah'* and lost consciousness.

When he came round, he was on the cot in the *peeru* house. His wife and children were wailing around him. Those around didn't know what to do. Some advised Putthuru bandage, and some others thought it would be better to take him to Cuddapah hospital. Some said Kurnool was better. Looking at his wounds and his immobile legs Masthan wept. Some first-aid treatment was given. Masthan spent the day writhing in pain.

Aswatha Reddy and the M.L.A candidate in the election Pulla Reddy appeared the next morning. In a matter of minutes they arranged to take Masthan to Vellore hospital in a van.

The poor and common people appreciated their generosity. Why, even Tolla Kamal changed his stance after that. The song written by some lyricist "Brother Pulla Reddy, you have a golden hand...."reverberated in the villages.

Reddy regretted that his strategy didn't work. With Masthan admitted in the hospital there was a change in the people and he thought Pulla Reddy would surely win. He convinced his candidate that he would take care of it the night prior to election day and reduced the intensity of canvassing.

What if Masthan was not involved actively, Janata candidate Pulla Reddy won the election.

Masthan was back at the *peeru* house with one leg and two fingers missing. The entire village came to see him. Though Masthan was hurt that Aswatha Reddy didn't come to see him, he thought it was ok as he helped him when he was in need. He prayed to Allah that Pulla Reddy should win every time.

If he looked at the *peeru* house he found that it didn't change much. He understood that only a couple of rafters were replaced, the holes were filled and white-washed. The hay roof was not replaced.

Masthan called the old *peeru* Saibu, and he told him hesitatingly what happened.

Some money was given to each family. Some were given petty loans. Over and above that since they had spent so much on Masthan none of them insisted about the *peeru* house.

Masthan consoled himself with the thought, 'the old man must have got some money, but it's ok. At least the *peeru* house looks slightly better now. We can think of it again in the next elections. I too got back this life.'

A couple of years passed after Masthan came back. He spent the whole day in the *peeru* house. With the remaining one acre of land, working in the gardens and with other things Masthan's wife was managing the expenses. Masthan got scared of the cock-fights and stopped breeding cocks. The sobriquet 'Cock-Masthan' gradually became 'Lame Masthan'.

It became difficult to get on with life. The high schools reopened. The day came when they had to send Vali to the neighbouring village for studying class eight. Masthan was in a dilemma whether to ask Aswatha Reddy for help or not.

One day Aswatha Reddy's farm hand brought the message that the president wanted to see him.

Along with his son, lame Masthan went to see Aswatha Reddy at home with a lot of hope. Aswatha Reddy was sitting on the stoep at his low desk. "Come Masthan" he said. He didn't ask him to sit down. Except in election times Aswatha Reddy knew how to keep people in their places.

Vali was looking around nervously.

Aswatha Reddy unsheathed his knives. "Look here, Masthan, I take pity on you...Pulla Reddy has written this letter... he has asked me to tell you. Again, the expenditure at the Vellore hospital on you was three thousand rupees. When you were at the hospital, for the household expenses I had given your wife four or five hundred rupees. You are a respectable person. And that M L A had spent about seven or eight lakhs for the elections, poor man. These are days when even the fellow on the threshold of death demands money for voting. Ok, he has written that it would be nice

if you give at least half the money spent on you.. What should we do....?"

It was a bolt from the blue for Masthan. He couldn't speak. He was angry. He was annoyed. He was hurt. He remembered his helplessness. He looked at his amputated limb. He looked at Vali. He looked at the hard face of Aswatha Reddy. He came to pour out his woes and now he was bound.

Aswatha Reddy said gently but firmly. "How can you give the money? Here, put your signature on this bond paper. I have written it for fifteen hundred rupees. If you want, you can look at the bills from the hospital. You can return the money when you afford to..."

Masthan scratched his signature on the bond paper silently and turned back. He saw Reddy coming to the president's house. He remembered the M L A joining Indiramma's party and they have joined hands now. He understood that it's a game they played.

He sat in the *peeru* house and cursed himself for not telling them that all the problems he faced were because of them. He thought sorrowfully that as the lemons destroyed his father, cocks destroyed him.

Vali sat beside his father and asked hesitantly, "*Ba*, is Asithu Reddy a good man?"

Masthan didn't respond.

"During the elections when we went around in the lorry he gave us money. Though he gave a rupee each to other boys, he gave me two rupees."

"If he needs us any son of a *kafir* would give."

"I didn't take the money. I went on the lorry only once. The new teacher at school asked me not go in the lorry...it seems whoever spends money in the elections rules?"

"It's for the sons of....." Masthan started hurling abuses as he was furious.

"In that case why should we vote? Though you cast your vote he made you sign a bond. Why?"

Masthan had no answer for that question. He was thinking of the problem that faced him. That one acre too would be lost in repaying the debt. Asithu Reddy would include it in his land. 'All of them are bastards', he thought. He looked up at the *peeru* box. He couldn't contain his anger any longer.

"There will be elections again soon. I'll teach a lesson to the sons of..." he struck the ground with his staff.

All this looked unjust to Vali's small brain. When he understood whatever happened, and whatever his new teacher told him his blood boiled. Anger was struggling to shape up in his child-heart.

The *peeru* house... though white-washed, and a couple of new rafters replaced the old ones... hadn't changed much...

Lame Masthan, like the *peeru* which was polished bright and broken in the fire walk during the *peeru* festival ...looking forward to the next *peeru* festival.. looking forward to the next elections...

Vali, like the green neem tree in front of the house, with its swaying branches... looking forward to fresh breeze and light...

Both of them in the *peeru* house.....

Evening Meal

One inch less than six feet, a built like the fully grown thorny bush that devours the entire sap but looks moderate, a bullish face hardened by the thirty years of service, small eyes that betray a look as if the usual patience would turn into anger any moment, hawk-nose, big ears, rough lips that look as if they had been gnarled by beedis, various cigarettes, whatever kind of liquors and harsh abuses, a shirt with the sleeves touching his elbows, crumpled but stiff khaki knickers, size eleven slippers ready for retirement, the topee-less bald head with a few strands of scraggy hair, a *single-meal-carrier* in the right hand that should wield a *lathi* – this was the *mufti* appearance of Kondayya at the hotel that afternoon.

The hotel proprietor saw *mufti* Kondayya and the carrier in his hand. 'Two full meals gone' he cursed to himself, muttered and silenced his anger.

"Come in, Kondayya, have a seat," he ushered him in.

Kondayya sat on the chair at a vacant table.

Meanwhile, a gentleman who had finished eating came out wiping his washed hand saying, "What terrible meal do you serve! It's a shame that you're doing so in the proximity of God's temple!"

The proprietor poured out his woes, how he incurred loss in business. "What do you want me to do? Prices are soaring. You say such things shouldn't happen in the proximity of the temple. Do we have a huge treasure? We have our own problems. Who's there to listen to us? If you

were in my place you wouldn't have managed the hotel even for a day."

Whatever he thought of it, the elderly gentleman silently walked out wiping his lips.

Listening to him Kondayya thought, 'Though the prices have gone up, has the number of people climbing the hill to pray to the Lord reduced? The sons of an ass who earn through unfair means wail about problems. There's nobody to question them.' But Kondayya didn't realise that the proprietor had included the police as well, as a problem.

Picking up the *carrier*, the hotel waiter asked him, "*Saar*, today what do you want from the hotel? Rice? Vegetables? *Sambar*? Buttermilk? No curds."

With his small eyes and hawk-nose, Kondayya had already looked into the leaf-plates of those eating at the various tables.

"Rice, vegetables and *sambar*" he said.

The waiter looked at the proprietor as he was going in with the *carrier*. The proprietor, who was wondering when the accursed nuisance would leave, ordered him to make it fast. He couldn't contain his annoyance any longer and asked, "Who has arrived now?" with a mocking tone.

Kondayya was provoked. He started his series of abuses. "What do you mean 'who has arrived'? Like death upon me...some relative of my boss in the department...son of a...we are not able to handle the bosses in the department...on top of it these bosses of the bosses...they give the pretext of a special duty to the minister and the bandobust...donkey's life... as if there is plenty of...we're better off today, only one bastard arrived, not an entire brood."

"Yesterday we saw off the big boss the DIG, the day before it was standing in attendance to the minister. They sit

cool and telephone, give orders and abuse us. Troubles galore! In this blessed job we have to forget that we too have families. This is it today. We don't know which bastard would arrive with which bitch...*thooth*...son of a...these people expect us to take help from some son of a... to seek shortcuts to go into the sanctum sanctorum. We have to carry food for them...beg people like you to give a meal free of cost...it's better to shave the heads of devotees on this hill than be on duty here."

"*Saar*, carrier." The waiter kept the carrier on the table and reminded him.

Kondayya's outburst subsided by then. He came to his senses. He looked around. All around him at the tables there were people from villages waiting to go into the temple in their yellow attires. He was relieved that nobody bothered about him. He wanted to eat his meal there. 'Why should I eat in this wretched place? Moreover I need curd' he thought. He picked up the carrier and was about to walk out.

'One full meal saved,' thought the proprietor. As if Kondayya's ranting was soothing to his ears, he asked, "In your department they've allotted a fund for such things, what's the problem then?"

With the proprietor's question Kondayya came back and shouted, "Do you think it's like the election fund that people like you give? There's a huge fund...come I'll feed you too...you grumble at one carrier full of meal..." At that a couple of people around laughed. The proprietor couldn't say a word in reply. He couldn't face the angry bull-faced Kondayya and pretended to be counting money in the money-box at the counter.

'Bastard, six years ago he was selling *vadas* down there in Tirupati, on the roadside, he's talking big today,' thought Kondayya. At the same time he asked himself if he could talk so boldly with any other hotel fellow. Comparing the hotel

owner's luck and his own life, he climbed the steps of another hotel. He packed some curds in the carrier and also ate his lunch there. Kondayya didn't have a chance to hurl his abuses in that hotel. With the carrier hanging from his shoulders Kondayya walked towards the T.B. Cottages.

All along the road, with modern and old fashioned devotees thronging, the scenario was a hotchpotch of villages, towns and cities.

Walking devotees, buses, devotees in cars...

Bush-like hair, beards, smooth shaven heads...

Tuft, crops, step-cut hair, pony-tails, plaits, hair gathered into buns...

Poverty-dripping tatters, expensive clothes...

Bare necks, necks decked up with jewellery...

Bags and suitcases on heads, vanity bags on the shoulders, air-bags, a variety of caste-marks on the foreheads, vermillion marks...

Chorus of *govinda, govinda*, small talk that has nothing to do with devotion. A man in saffron clothes was telling the innocent villagers, "*Abba! Abba!* If you want to see *Vaikuntham* in these days of *Kali* it's here! What a crowd of devotees from distant places! What a glory! How wonderful is the Lord's power!"

Kondayya's ears caught the words. Till then he was cursing the people who came to the temple on the hill to give him so much trouble. With those words of the man he started thinking of the power of the Lord. "This God's power is great just like the power of the police which has no fullstop. With the power of the police the carrier got filled just like the power of God gets the *hundi* filled." Kondayya liked his own analogy. A silent smile played on his coarse lips. His inherent religious belief made him repent his thought, 'It's wrong to compare the power of the police

with the power of the Lord.' Meanwhile he remembered the cadres in his department.

'The SI above him, above him the CI, then the Dy.SP, SP, DIG, home Minister, the Chief Minister, then there were the clerks, secretaries, above them? Under whose power is he working? Under whose power is he carrying the carrier? For who? Why was he carrying it?'

There should be some reason and there would be no dearth of thought. Whenever such situation arose in the past thirty years of his 'service to people', Kondayya had engaged himself in such thoughts about power. But he was not able to understand fully the source of his power.

Kondayya felt like smoking a *beedi.* He put his hand inside his shirt pocket. His hand touched the empty Mangalore Ganesh brand *beedi* packet. He put his hand into the left pocket of his knickers. His hand touched a ten rupee note. He bought a packet of 'Scissors' and a box of matches and took the change, put some in his knicker- pocket and some in his shirt pocket.

He threw away the second cigarette butt and reached the cottage.

It was cool inside the cottage. Mahesh Yogi's discourse could be heard from the tape recorder kept on the table. 'The guest of the department for the day', Subba Rao was stretched on the bed listening to the discourse with eyes closed. As he was a lecturer in English he felt that Mahesh Yogi's English did not have the fluency of waterfall that Chinmayananda's had. Yet, as he had become interested in transcendental meditation, he felt there was some inexplicable depth and essence in Mahesh Yogi's English discourse. Intermittently, Subba Rao recollected the Lord's idol he saw in the morning. Like Sankaracharya who found links between existentialism and 'hymns to Devi', he was trying to find links between transcendental meditation and the image of the Lord. Talking about 'beyond worldliness'

but being very much steeped in worldliness, what can poor Subba Rao do?

Kondayya viewed Subba Rao's meditation. He seethed with anger. 'If there are fellows to run around anyone can sit in meditation', he thought. He kept the carrier on the table and said softly, "*Appa,* I've brought your meal."

Subba Rao was brought back to this world. He switched off the devotional discourse and sat down to eat silently. Kondayya was cursing him to himself as he served.

"The rice and vegetables are tasty" Subba Rao appreciated.

"*Appa.*"

"The *carry-home meals* on the hill is good!"

"Yes it's good, *appa.*"

"You don't get such thick curds even in Rajahmundry."

"I've ordered it specially for you, *Appa.*"

Subba Rao did not comment about the food any more. He had a satisfactory meal. He checked the time. 'I should catch the Tirumala Express at seven o'clock. By now the SI would have reserved a seat for me. I should manage to have another glimpse of the idol,' he thought. He said to Kondayya. "If possible I should have a glimpse of the Lord once again".

Kondayya's heart missed a beat when he thought that he would be asked to accompany him. In the morning to take him to the sanctum sanctorum in the short cut, he had a lot of trouble. Somebody did remark, 'it seems the temple is kept open only for the police!' He remembered the remark and said weakly, "Ok *appa*, Did you have a good view of the idol in the morning?"

"Yes, you had arranged it well Kondayya. By the way have you had your lunch?"

"Yes, I did. You insisted on my taking money from you. Here's the change"

Subba Rao did not take the change Kondayya took out from his shirt pocket. He said kindly, "Keep it Kondayya! People like us keep coming. You have to spend for your food. How much can you spend from your pocket?"

For a minute Kondayya's hard heart felt guilty. He remembered how from the money Subba Rao gave for the meal he spent for his cigarettes and put the change in the knicker- pocket and had decided to give back only the rest of the change.

Subba Rao got ready to go out. "Kondayya, take rest. I'll take a stroll and will be back." He said.

Any other time Kondayya would have thought, 'Rest is for people like you, not for us!' but he couldn't, now. He said sincerely, "I don't need any rest. You have some rest."

"I don't take naps in the afternoon. I'll be back at half past four. Let's go then."

"To the temple, *appa*?"

"Yes"

"Ok, fine."

For some reason Subba Rao said, "You need not come with me, I'll go on my own." Kondayya did not insist on accompanying him.

Subba Rao walked towards the temple. Kondayya was not aware that he had another recommendation letter in his pocket.

The event since morning started playing in Kondayya's mind. He remembered how Subba Rao requested the SI to send someone with him as he was new to Tirupati, how he was asked to accompany him, how Subba Rao paid the bus fare himself, how he booked the cottage and instead of

arrogantly asking him to get lunch for him Subba Rao paid for the lunch and now how he offered to go to the temple alone instead of demanding that he be accompanied. 'If all the officers and their relatives behaved so there wouldn't be any problem.' He thought. Usually people who came up the hill to the Lord's temple always gave him a lot of trouble, and he remembered the recent experience he had had.

About a month ago the son of the Deputy Secretary came along with his family. That day the CI was also with them. The gentleman agreed to whatever his wife said. He wanted as much offerings as he could eat. She wanted to worship each and every stone there. She wanted to pack as much *prasadam* as possible to distribute it among her people back home at Hyderabad. The three children were little devils. The one-year-old youngest child was a worse devil. The moment they entered the temple she started howling. Her mother immediately handed her over to Kondayya. By the time the CI took the rest of them round the temple and joined him, the child had given Kondayya enough trouble. She made him resent his life! When he put the sweet *laddu* into her mouth she ate it all up and came round with her mouth watering. The mother, when she saw it, chided him for feeding the child so much of the sweet. She scolded him in incomprehensible English.

As if that was not enough, the eldest boy, who looked like a *laddu*, as he was hopping and jumping, skidded on the wet ground of the temple and fell down. In that pain he did not call for either his father or mother but cried out 'uncle...uncle', and stretched his hand towards the CI. Perhaps he remembered how Kondayya looked after his children when the CI picked up the boy and made him walk slowly. Meanwhile *ammagaru* wanted to have another visit to the sanctum sanctorum. The temple doors were about to close. The CI hurried him there and he had to run to ask them to wait...his knee got hurt. It got alright only recently.

Thinking of all those incidents Kondayya couldn't help appreciating Subba Rao. Tired with his thoughts and physical strain he fell asleep.

Subba Rao returned around half past four. He packed up and woke Kondayya up.

Both of them reached the bus station. They encountered another constable in uniform who alighted from the bus and was hurrying towards them. He turned to Subba Rao and said, "Sir the train ticket is ready. The SI asked me to accompany you. Kondayya has to stay back here."

Subba Rao smiled in response.

Kondayya fumed at the bad news brought by the constable. He glared at Subba Rao and his fellow constable.

"I'll have a word with him," the fellow constable said to Subba Rao and took Kondayya aside to tell him softly, "PA to our minister is coming with his family. The PA's uncle, aunt, their uncle and aunt are arriving."

"It's like 'when the prostitute's house is looted the mendicants run naked'...sons of...what a job..."Kondayya forgot where he was and started hurling abuses.

The fellow constable tried to reason with him, "It's an order from above. If you abuse you hurt your lips, that's all. Reddappa will be bringing them along. We've already booked the cottage TBC 13. You wait for them there with the carriers ready. Of late you have been looking after the arrangement for food here on the hill. Reddappa will look after the other arrangements...about their visit to the temple and so on..."

His fellow constable left with Subba Rao.

It was as if Subba Rao took away peace from Tirupati hill. Kondayya was restless.

Later, Reddappa arrived with the elderly people. As soon as they came, the old woman, the minister's PA's aunt, called

Kondayya. "Look here, are you the one who arranges food for us here?"

"Yes, *ammagaru*."

"Ok, they use a lot of spices here, don't bring hot stuff for us."

"Ok, *ammagaru*."

"*Ayyagaru* catches cold if he has curd in the evening, so bring him some hot milk instead."

"Ok, *amma garu*."

"The other two people eat fruit. Bring some half a dozen apples, a dozen sweet limes and half a kilo of some good sweets..." The list was long. She was telling him about the next day's breakfast. Kondayya' started fuming within while he said ok to everything she demanded.

Meanwhile the PA's uncle started with his demands. "Is your name Kondayya?"

"Yes, *Appa*"

"So, your CI has asked two constables to look after us. Last time the CI himself was in attendance. He brought us here in a taxi. Now they dumped us in a bus. Last time they housed us in the guest house, this time they put us in this cottage."

"There's a crowd on the hill now, *appa*"

"That's why we asked you. That old CI was a decent fellow. The one who's here now is a fresh recruit. Youngsters who don't know who deserves how much respect have joined the department."

"Yes, *appa*"

The PA's aunt interrupted to assign him some work. They caught hold of him like devils. They drove him to the market six times on some pretext or the other. They went on

nagging him. Kondayya lost his patience. He looked like a worn out tyre ready to burst.

That evening, equipping himself with a 'double carrier and a single carrier' on both shoulders like the 'conch and disk', Kondayya came out of the cottage. Looking at Reddappa lighting a *beedi* at a distance he thought, 'they're taking the life out of me for food; you too will have a taste of it in the temple tomorrow. These old hags are the type who'd trouble you even after they reach Hyderabad.'

Reddappa saw Kondayya and called him close to him. Handing him a ten rupee note he said, "Get some biscuits and fruit. Who'll give us anything free of cost? How much do we spend? The SI gave me fifty rupees. I put in another fifty. Already I've spent thirty rupees. These old people seem to have come here only to eat. Before they leave tomorrow they might ask for *laddus, vadas, pictures, replicas of the idol, kasi threads*...we don't know what they would ask for... we've to bear with them till they leave."

Kondayya's small eyes looked at Reddappa. His contempt was obvious in that look. He was about to say something when the PA's uncle called him. Reddappa hurried to the cottage.

The two carriers as a symbol of the power of his uniform, Kondayya climbed the steps of a big hotel. He avoided the two hotels he went to in the morning. He kept the two carriers on the proprietor's table. He didn't have the patience to speak a word. He sat at one table.

A waiter took the carriers and went in, another was serving Kondayya. Kondayya started eating silently. An old waiter who'd never seen Kondayya thus was amused and whispered something into the ears of a newly recruited colleague. The new waiter burst into peels of laughter.

Everyone's attention turned to them. The proprietor got irritated. "You get some respite and you forget that this is a hotel. You think this is a cinema hall. You have too much to eat..."

The new waiter retorted, "We are not begging. We work and in return we get food."

The waiter's response infuriated the proprietor. It touched the raw spot in Kondayya. Though the fellow was only one week old in service the proprietor did not know how to handle the fellow who did two people's share of work. Kondayya did not understand what to do with the fellow who spoke the truth without any violence.

Kondayya stared at the waiter with his small eyes. The waiter stared back steadily. Something stirred within him. His lips couldn't hurl abuses. He didn't feel like eating his food. He picked up the heavy carriers and walked out.

Outside, the Tirupati hill jostling with devotees in the bright streetlights as if it was a scene in a mythological film, looked like a fantasy.

Devotees' night of fantasy

The offerings would be for some other family of some other boss the next day. Who would be there with fresh orders the next day, Kondayya had no idea. The truth the waiter spoke was burning his insides. The two carriers gradually felt heavier and heavier, beyond him to carry them, urging him to fling them away....

The Divine Power

In the Rotary Club that day there was a special lecture by a famous Bio-chemistry Professor who had come to the University for a Ph.D viva-voce. Members of the club and invitees listened to an hour-long lecture on 'Godmen-Miracle Treatment' and were transported into another world for a while. After the moonlight dinner the discussion dwelt on the miracles of god men and women, and on trance. During the discussion the professor explained with evidences how the Ramapuram Appanayana's touch could treat difficult diseases which were beyond the doctors. Except a couple of pharmacists and three doctors all the other members were happy that a person like Appanayana lived in their district. They might need such miracles some day!

Somebody suggested to the English Reader at the University, Dr. Santivardhan. "Dr. Santivardhan, why don't you give a try? Just in case...Vellore and other places are a waste. Waste of money...Everything is a bash..."

"What should Santivardhan try?" asked someone.

"His son... three year-old...some mystery disease...so far..."

When the topic of his son's disease came up, Dr. Santivardhan could not take it anymore...he excused himself saying he was getting late and left for home on his scooter.

Yes. Why shouldn't he take a chance? What's wrong? A professor of bio-chemistry with a big name in the country had narrated his experience, with so many evidences. Babu's health hadn't improved. He had already spent over two

thousand rupees on the doctors, specialists and so on. They couldn't diagnose the disease, but the treatment was on. He seemed to get alright but there were relapses. Whenever he wanted to take him to Vellore or to Vijaya Hospital at Madras, his paediatrician friend always asked him to wait. Spending five or six thousands rupees was not a problem. He need not use Sujatha's dowry. Suppose he took him to Ramapuram...

Santivardhan decided to take his son to Ramapuram.

He announced this at home. His wife, a lecturer in Physics, said, "good." His mother was happy. After her daughter-in-law left she said, "Write to your brother-in-law to take your sister to Ramapuram." Santivardhan agreed to do so. "Don't know what problems she's facing in that village, in her life of want." His mother was sad thinking of her daughter's life, the daughter-in-law's bossing over her and her son's unreal world.

Dr. Santivardhan set out to Ramapuram with his wife and son. He was flabbergasted at the number of people visiting Appanayana.

By Appanayana's grace there was a new road laid to that remote village and the special buses plied on it. The local heads and government officials had made elaborate arrangements. Construction of an ashram had taken off in a big way. Patients from distant places in cars, buses and walking to the place, women with children in their arms, men, old people, many people affected by incurable diseases!

After meeting Appananayana Santivardhan remembered all the mystic poetry he had read. Appanayana's personality, his speech, his laughter, touch, everything seemed ethereal.

After returning from Ramapuram, within a week his son's health improved. His paediatrician friend did a thorough

check up and said, "He's alright now. You wanted to take him to Madras, Vellore and other places, as if we're all useless people," and laughed.

Santivardhan did not counter the doctor's confidence. He didn't tell him about his trip to Ramapuram. Now the ancient culture in Santivardhan had opened its thousand eyes.

Now Santivardhan got completely immersed in the world of Appanayana. He started going to Ramapuram often. He started collecting Appanayana's discourses and miracles, to write a book thereby using his knowledge in English well.

When he was occupied with the book he got a letter from his brother-in-law that his sister's health was deteriorating, that as there were no rains the crops failed, that Prasad had no hopes of getting a job, that if he knew some good doctors in Tirupati he would send his sister along with Prasad.

He wanted to tell his mother about the letter, but thinking of the row Sujatha would kick up he didn't.

If they come here, he won't have any peace of mind. The book must be completed in a month. Moreover the book would be released by the Minister.

Once he remembered his sister's family life and that his mother asked him to take her to Ramapuram. He called his mother aside and told her, "I'm also sending a money-order for a hundred rupees." His mother was overwhelmed with happiness.

Santivardhan wrote a long letter to his brother-in-law advising him to take his sister to Appanayana.

The details of the launching of the book that Santivardhan wrote about Appanayana were broadcast by

All India Radio. After about four days along with letters of appreciation Santivardhan got another letter.

Dr. Santivardhan, M.A., Ph.D,

Dear uncle,

I had the pleasure of reading your letter to my father. I did not understand if you wrote with your money-wise mind or with excess of wisdom.

Because of the intellectuals like you and the efforts of the government Appanayana's name spread even to our villages. Good. When poverty increases, ignorance too should spread. Otherwise how would a minister launch a book like the one you have written? Have you not been promoted as a professor yet? Have you been able to sell at least ten thousand copies of the book?

What do you think my mother has been suffering from? Have you heard of 'malnutrition'? That's the cause of the disease. Because you have written and also sent some money my father is going to take my mother to Ramapuram to Appanayana.

I hope people like my father would understand something in future; that people like you and your families can afford to go back to the regular medical treatment if Appanayana fails, but the losers are always those who can't afford medical treatment.

One last word! Please write if Appanayana can cure malnutrition. I will take your own sister and many others like her in my village to him. Especially if he can treat the disease called unemployment. We can send the entire Employment Exchange to him.

Yours,
by chance, unemployed nephew
Prasad, M.A.

The letter fell into Sujatha's hands. She kicked up a row. She abused the past and present generations of his family. As his mother was silently weeping, he got irritated and said, "This fellow is the cause of all the problems in that house." Then he flew into the world of Appanayana.

He had his escapade then, but of late Prasad had been coming into Santivardhan's dreams. How many such people intend destroying the pleasant dreams of Appanayana followers?

Freedom

When Sambayya died everyone was happy for some reason or the other. Only Sambayya's wife wept as she became a widow. That's all. Sambayya didn't have children, so, the relatives looked forward to the entire property which would be theirs if Sayamma also died. 'The shear-like man is dead; would that woman Sayamma be able to collect the money lent to us?' those who had borrowed from Sambayya thought happily. The poor, who knew Sayamma's good nature when Sambayya was alive, hoped that she would write off their debts.

Some time in the past, when Ganuga Mallamma's ox broke into his field Sambayya had kicked it to death. Ganuga Mallamma couldn't do anything but mourn for a couple of days. She could only curse him. Now that Sambayya was dead she looked at the calf and wept. She consoled herself that he couldn't escape the curse of the poor. 'Rascal, he didn't have to suffer but had an easy death' she felt unhappy.

Ramudu thought that in Sambayya's death he got his salvation. His heart was full of hatred for Sambayya. Though Sambayya was his distant uncle, it didn't take long for Ramudu to understand that he was responsible for his mother's death as a destitute and his becoming a farm hand as a child.

Three years ago, when her husband died a drunken debauch, after losing everything to gambling, Ramudu's mother took refuge in Sambayya's house as he was her distant brother. Sambayya was worldly wise. So he gave shelter to his sister and her well grown ten-year-old son as

he could make them work for him for a square meal a day in those hard times.

Ramudu's mother thought that her heirless brother would do her son some good. For two years she worked hard looking after his fields, farms, crops and barns, vigilant as a crow. A year ago she died of consumption, for want of any medical treatment. Since last year, Ramudu was transformed into a child farm hand.

That's why Ramudu detested Sambayya. For him Sambayya was not an uncle but a devil who drove him to the cattle-enclosure, to the barn, to the fields, to the winnow, to the grinding-stone, to get the cattle-feed, to fetch water, without giving him a moment's rest or respite. That's why he could see his salvation in Sambayya's death.

But when Sayamma was in grief at Sambayya's death he couldn't help feeling sorry. He had a soft spot for his aunt. He was moved not because she was related to him but because of her humane nature. All these days, though she didn't look after him as if he was one in the family, she did feed him well. So, he wept not because Sambayya was dead but because she was in grief.

When she hugged him and wept saying, "I've nobody except you. Everyone around here is a sucker" he remembered his mother and wept too. As he wept he thought Sayamma would look after him as his own mother did.

When the funeral rituals were over, Ramudu breathed freely in that house. For about a month Sayamma looked after him well. During those days she thought she should bring him up and get him married and settled in life, and also give him some property.

As she got used to the fact that her husband was dead and that now she was in charge of the household, gradually there came a change over her. She didn't nag as Sambayya did and

was a little more civilized. But in several matters Ramudu could see a mini Sambayya in Sayamma. With that, the enthusiasm in him gradually waned. He lost verve in his work. He lost interest. He became like a convict looking forward to the end of his prison term. Just like a prisoner getting angry with the prison superintendent and the prison, he too started hating Sayamma and her house.

That evening Sayamma asked Ramudu to take the sheep out for grazing. Ramudu took it to the outskirts of the fields to graze. The boys playing under the tamarind tree called him out to play with them. Playing with them, Ramudu forgot himself. When it was time to return home, he looked around for the sheep. It was nowhere to be seen. Ramudu was scared. He was scared of what Sayamma would do if he went home.

"The sheep must have reached home," said his friend.

"It's a new one. It doesn't know the way," he said and started looking for it and searched all over the fields and cattle-enclosures. The sheep could not be found anywhere. When it was getting dark he reached home with fear in his heart.

"Where's the sheep?" Sayamma asked him with apprehension.

"Hasn't it reached home?" asked Ramudu gathering courage.

Sayamma got her answer in his question. Just the other day when she kicked up a row that Golla Chinnabbi hadn't repaid the loan, he had brought the sheep to her as a surety. The animal would have fetched two or three hundred rupees in a month. When she thought over the interest and the accounts, she seemed to be possessed by her husband. She started hurling abuses. "Where were you, dead? Where were

you roaming about? You are over fourteen years, have you not got rid of the childish pranks? You're out to destroy us. Fending for you I've become a bankrupt! Tomorrow by the afternoon if you don't bring back the sheep, I'll teach you a lesson. The sheep is also like you, a thief. See if it got among the other animals...."

Unable to control her rage she picked up the old wicker winnow and started beating Ramudu with it.

Ramudu was enraged. But he kept quiet. Sayamma kept on ranting against him.

Meanwhile a child of Sambayya's relative came running and gave her the good news. "*Sinnamma*, our sheep got mixed with their animals. Golla Sinnabbi's son met me and told me about it. Now it's raining, so send Ramudu tomorrow in the morning."

"You're as caring as your uncle," Sayamma appreciated him and sent him away. Then she flung some food into Ramudu's plate. "Come and gobble up your food! You don't eat two morsels less any day. But you shirk work. Learn something from that boy." She abused him.

He didn't feel like eating. Still, his physical work made him hungry. So he made himself eat some food reluctantly and went and stretched himself on the platform for the carts.

It continued to rain. He couldn't sleep. On that rainy night he started thinking of his mother, the village they lived in three years ago, the trees, the gardens, groves, the school he went to, the teacher who said he was a good student, his plays and playmates, then his life in Sambayya's house, everything. He wept late into the night and fell asleep sometime in the early morning. He didn't know when it stopped raining.

At the first crow of the cock Sayamma woke him up and said harshly, "Go, gather the cow dung into the basket and then get the sheep back."

With sleep-laden eyes, hungry and weak, when he was dragging himself along the road next to the school, he saw children forming rows. A couple of tri-colour flags were in the hands of some. The old bachelor teacher, with cane in hand, was preparing them for the Independence Day. He understood that it was Independence Day.

Three years ago he too stood as one of them in his village. On some occasion on one such Independence Day he remembered to have asked his teacher, "What is Independence Day?". He didn't remember his teacher's reply. He struggled now to remember it as he walked ahead. He reached the Golla Chinnabbi's flock.

As Ramudu approached him Golla Chinnabbi brought the sheep and gave it to him. And he asked, "Didn't your aunt scold you last night?" Ramudu didn't respond and tried to carry the sheep away silently. It refused to go with him and started bleating. With that the entire flock started bleating. He dragged it away as it was bleating.

As he approached the village he could hear the shouts of the school children hailing Independence. On the other side he could hear the bleating of the animals. He saw the red moths flying across the path. The after-rain breeze was cool in the morning. The sun was young. The sheep was bleating. Something stirred in Ramudu.

He loosened the string tied to the sheep. As it ran back to the flock happiness was kindled in him. At that moment he seemed to have understood what freedom was. He took one moth into his hands, played with it for a while, and released it. As it crawled on the ground, he felt happy. He

started playing. 'I'll never return to Sayamma's house,' he decided.

'Would they allow the sheep to stay with the flock? Would Sayamma be quiet? If he was caught, what would they do with him?' he thought. Ramudu felt hungry. He didn't know where to go, where to live, what to eat.

Ramudu felt confused, not knowing how to sustain his freedom.

Grass

On the cart track, along the dried up rivulet –

A pair of starved bullocks were dragging the stone-laden cart with great effort. They were dripping saliva. The cartwheels were moving heavily on the sand.

The bullocks spotted some dry leaves and straw on the path. They strained their necks and struggled hard to reach out to the pieces of straw and withered leaves with their tongues outstretched. The one on the right side turned restive and brought the yoke under its neck. Sitting on the front frame of the cart, Pulla Reddy looked at the struggling bullocks. He was filled with anguish. He stopped the cart, fixed the tether to the shuttle, got down and fixed the yoke back in its place.

He gathered up all the straw and the dry leaves, dusted off the sand. He stretched them out to the bullocks' mouths with utmost care, and then he climbed back into the cart and coaxed them to move forward. The bullocks dragged the cart ahead, chewing, eyeing the thorny babul bushes criss-crossing the sand mounds along the dirt path, mistaking them for grass.

Heat. Not a leaf stirred. The shirtless body was drenched in sweat. Pulla Reddy looked at the sky. Not a whiff of cloud in sight. It looked empty, like the promises of the bigwigs. He looked around. The dry rivulet looked like a farmer waiting for the rains. The wasted wetlands had stubborn thorny weeds abounding the ridges. The chequered black-soil looked like pieces of heart barbequed and turned into cinders. A little ahead was the village threshing-ground.

Except for a couple of threshing enclosures where lay some dry stacks of maize or paddy stalks all the others were almost empty. With a few stalks of lentil and cotton they were bare walls- like desolate lives.

Pulla Reddy's heart was struck by famine.

'This blasted famine is incinerating everybody. Farmers have no seeds at home, nor do they have creditworthiness. The cattle sheds have no feed for the cattle. The elders talk about the great famine. But such a famine, with no grass in the cattle enclosure, he had not seen such a severe famine. Most of the farmers except a handful of the well-to-do in the village, had to sell off their cattle in their tethers at throwaway prices at the Pulivendla fair. They loved their cattle like their children but couldn't gather enough fodder to keep them alive. They had no choice but to sell them off. One day he saw them heading towards Bangalore with truckloads of mute bullocks. Almost thirty-forty bullocks in harness were sold off from the villages. Didn't he see Narayudu selling off his three thousand rupee worth bullocks for a mere thousand? Then didn't he weep for losing them? What about himself? Didn't he have to sell off his milche-cows to save his farm-bullocks? The president had engaged his bullocks for the schoolwork. That's how they were saved. How could he have saved them when the very survival of his mother and himself was so threatened? In fact his two-acre land was still under mortgage for the tyre-cart he had bought. The money he got for hiring his cart out was not even enough to provide two square meals a day. Neither was there any cattle feed in the cattle shed.

The cart approached the village. Whichever way you turned you encountered only wild thorny bushes. Looking at them Pulla Reddy felt enraged. Some time ago a thorn broke in his foot. Treating his foot with kerosene and acacia leaves

was of no use. He had to suffer for a month. He remembered it and the very sight of them filled him with remorse.

'These things are never touched by famine. Wells may dry up, a blade of green grass may become rare, but these deadly thorns grow in abundance, perhaps drawing the sap from the nadirs of earth, they remain evergreen. Blast the hunch back Shetty, blast the *karanam*, blast the police, blast the white pig of the vet, blast the harbingers of famine...*thoo*...you bastardly...' Pulla Reddy cleared his throat and spat with a loud noise.

Golla Boyadu was passing by and he admonished him. "Ahoy *alluda*, watch out. What do you think this is, a path for men to walk on or a jungle for wild animals?"

"My fault, *mama*" Pulla Reddy apologised as he coaxed the bullocks to run faster.

Golla Boyadu walked alongside the cart.

"You're better off, *alludu*. At a time when the farmers are selling off their farm bulls and when even the shepherds like me are parting with their sheep you have somehow managed to keep the cart and the bullocks."

"Oh yes, I eat a lot and am getting fatter, look at these poor bullocks. They haven't got to eat even a handful of bran for the past six months."

"Get them a little wicker basketful of fodder, *alludu*, what's your problem? After all you have no wife or children!"

Pulla Reddy didn't mind Golla Boyadu pulling his leg. He laughed.

"Can the famine-stricken life afford marriage? Anyway rearing bullocks is not as easy as rearing sheep, whatever you may say. What do you think my mother and me would eat?"

Golla Boyadu knew what the answer was. He tried to look cheerful. "By the way *alludu*, I forgot to tell you. Government people are unloading wagons of paddy grass. Those who had seen this at Muddanur station told me. Ah, stacks of grass like hillocks around the station, they said. My people got truckloads of them in their villages. Our village too is going to get its share in a day or two. They give it at half the price, I hear, and subsidised too. They will give so many bundles per bullock. Now the farmers need not worry. I went to the veterinary hospital to get the leg of the only lamb I am left with treated. There too I heard the news about the grass."

After giving the good news Golla Boyadu went his way.

The news was as good as the timely seasonal rains for Pulla Reddy.

Thoughts of how much grass they would give him, how much he'll have to buy, how much he could afford, how much he should borrow, where to get the loan and so on swarmed his brain.

Though help did not come forth at the right time, he was happy that the 'government people' were unloading the grass at least now. He felt that getting enough fodder for his bullocks was as good as saving the entire village.

With renewed energy he coaxed his bullocks to run faster. He unloaded the stones at the school. Looking at the heap of building stones the president wryly commented, "*yera*, you're getting worse by the day, bringing stones by count, are you? I'll have to get my head tonsured at this rate. They said it's public service and I was foolish enough to take up this contract in these times of famine."

Pulla Reddy answered cheerfully, "Look *chinnayana*, look at these wretched bullocks. Give them a cart load of cattle feed and I'll fill the cart with stones as you say."

The president was annoyed at the mention of cattle-feed. "*Aura*! People look at the few bundles of grass I am left with and pull my leg. Every one in the village wants grain and also the fodder I have. Don't you know the trouble I took bringing the fodder all the fifty miles? My Chennur brother-in-law may like it but it doesn't mean that because I'm your president you can loot me during election time and also in such times of want. Isn't there a limit? In a day or two you'll get paddy grass. I've talked to the higher-ups. You make your mother loosen her purse-strings and buy a cart load of grass for your bullocks. It is true that this fertilised paddy grass is not as good as our straw and groundnut husk. However..."

Pulla Reddy only laughed in response. The much awaited paddy grass didn't show up for another week or ten days. One fine morning a truck arrived. The grass was unloaded in the compound of the veterinary hospital. With farmers moving about enquiring about the grass, and with a few inquisitive people around, the veterinary hospital assumed a rare festive look of Sivaratri. The veterinary doctor Subbi Reddy looked important like the very incarnation of Bhagiratha who brought Ganga to the earth. He promised to the people that more truckloads would be there in a couple of days and that they would distribute grass to the entire village. Then there came another truck laden with grass. To keep their cattle alive people needed cattle feed. They need money for that. Farmers with no cash on hand started looking for loans. To make ends meet you have to struggle, to get some fodder you have to struggle. You can't escape struggling during famine.

The day the grass was to be distributed in the village Pulla Reddy had to go on a trip to the neighbouring village. As he was leaving he told his mother, "*Amma*, they have got our names too in the list. Take the hundred rupees we have

earned by way of renting out the cart and have kept aside to buy maize. Let's first get grass, we can think of our problems later".

Achchamma agreed.

That day the president sent word to Achchamma to work on the fields. She didn't want to lose her daily wage and went to work. 'Once they've taken down the name would they skip it and not give my share of grass?' Though she was busy working, her thoughts were with the place where they were distributing grass. Her heart was filled with anguish when she thought of her bullocks growing thin with starvation.

As soon as she finished her work and got her wages in the evening, she rushed home, took out her savings of the hundred rupees, tucked it in the hem of her waistline and hastened to the hospital.

A few stray pieces of grass lay scattered in front of the hospital. The hospital was open but no one was in sight. Achchamma was confused. It looked like a mystery to her. She didn't know what to do. Her heart pounding in her chest, she stepped inside the hospital room.

Doctor Subbi Reddy was resting in a chair, slowly puffing at a cigarette and calculating his profit from the sale of grass. Splitting each bundle into two, transport charges, and the cost of his running around for the supply of grass – he was busy adding and subtracting the figures which looked green and alluring in front of his eyes.

Never did he have so much money after he had taken up this job in the village. After all how much would the illegal sale of medicines fetch? Besides, his assistant always flicked a part of it. He was planning to manipulate a few more truckloads from the officials on the plea that the supply was inadequate. Or, he should somehow manage to provoke

president Reddy. Well, all of them got their share, why should they not come forward to help him again?'

Achchamma stood in front of Subbi Reddy and asked him innocently, "Where's my share of the grass, *docateru*? Give me my share, I'll carry it home."

Subbi Reddy slowly came out with the bad news. "It's over, *avva*, we'll get some more again."

"I saw such a big heap in the morning, *nayana*, is it all over? We don't even have a couple of dry stalks at home. My son will be furious with me for not collecting the grass early enough. We can't survive without the bullock cart. We had to sell our milch cows to Gooni Shetty and we're starving ourselves to look after these bullocks which are our only hope, *nayana*."

For a minute Subbi Reddy felt sorry for Achchamma. "I'll help you next time," he said and pretending to be reading, buried his head in his book.

Achchamma carefully tucked away the hundred rupees she had in her hand back in her sari waistline. She headed towards her home muttering to herself. She was confused.

As she walked back her eyes caught sight of the cattle enclosures of the president and a few other rich farmers. They were all laden with bundles of grass. She looked into Gooni Shetty's cattle enclosure, she looked into the president's, and she looked into the karanam's. Each moneyed farmer's place was stacked with bundles of grass. Achchamma was beside herself with rage.

There was no cattle feed in the loft, there were only a few dry stalks in her cattle enclosure fit enough to be used as fuel. Starving bullocks. What if they fall ill? Achchamma was filled with despair.

When she understood the injustice done, her blood boiled with rage. She was filled with anger towards the

'animal doctor'. As if possessed by some spirit she walked towards the hospital quickly.

As she walked, the hard times that wasted her entire life reeled before her eyes. Her life which had no rains, no crops, no water in the well, no green groves next to the well, no savings at home; her life that was spent somehow getting the family going, marrying off the two daughters, managing the fields with difficulty, every bit of property that was gone along with her father-in-law, Achchamma remembered it all. She remembered her husband who had to make do with a couple of coarse shirts and four loin cloths, a packet of *beedis* that he could afford only once in a while, and the luxury of buying vegetables and an *anna's* worth of betel leaves that he could enjoy occasionally. She thought of her son who toiled hard to meet the bare necessities of life, who couldn't afford a shirt except when he went to the neighbouring village on work. She remembered that she couldn't afford to get him married as the famine stood as a hurdle. She thought of her unending loans and her starving bullocks. Rich men's bullocks had plenty of feed but her bullocks had to starve.

Despair, anger and sorrow criss-crossed Achchamma's heart like a weaver bird's nest. She met Subbi Reddy on her way. Achchamma could no longer control her anguish.

"You dirty rag! Are you born of a farmer? You call yourself a Capu! Such injustice! Aren't we human beings? Do you think only the president, Gooni Shetty and the rich people are human beings? Don't we count? Do you eat food or fodder? You're so mean about the grass. You've starved the bullocks. You've starved us. Has death come to you? May you be struck by plague!"

Achchamma's shouts brought the small-time farmers sitting on the stoeps out into the street. Women folk with

infants on their hips, hurriedly gathering their hair into a knot, rushed into the street leaving their chores on hand. Children looked on with amusement. Youngsters found it all very strange.

Achchamma was speaking the language of pent up emotions and suppressed feelings. Those who had no money to buy grass, those who managed to lay their hands on a couple of bundles, those who returned empty-handed, those who had to bribe the doctor with chicken and other stuff to get their animals treated, all of them felt happy that the old woman was cursing 'the bastard'. They were all awe-struck at the unbelievable strength the seventy-year-old, quiet, hunched woman had in her.

Doctor Subbi Reddy shuddered as if centipedes were crawling all over his body. He was bathed in sweat. Wiping his face with his handkerchief he almost ran towards the president's house. He even thought if the sub-inspector would be there at the police station.

Farmers gathered in the street felt ashamed of themselves that they couldn't muster the courage of the old woman. Thoughts of building up an opposition to the president crossed the minds of some people. Achchamma got tired of cursing. She looked up and spat at the people around.

"Widowed-dirty-rags, *thoo*...not a dirty rag raises a voice against injustice. Is this a village or a land of the dead?"

Shouting and abusing, Achchamma's voice turned hoarse.

There, two miles away from the village, on the uneven path the two bullocks were dragging along the empty cart, weak and tired, chewing the cud of whatever little they got to eat at the village they were returning from.

Pulla Reddy was in a hurry to get back to the village. He looked around. A couple of whiffs of clouds were hanging in

the sky like the undying hopes of a farmer. In the hearts of farmers, crops of fertile soil. 'There won't be drought this time', he thought in spite of himself. He imagined heaps of grass that he saw in front of the hospital loaded onto his loft, and into the cattle-enclosures.

Drifting on cloud nine with those pleasant thoughts he swished his whip once on the yoke and tucked it in the upper frame of the cart. He coaxed his bullocks by patting them on their humps tha...tha...pa...pa...pa..., he made the sound to encourage his bullocks. Tha...tha...pa...pa... run, quick, for you'll get your bellyful of feed today....'

Here, in the village, the invisible fire that Achchamma stoked slowly steadily caught on in the hearts of the farmers.

The Trusted Land

At Erraguntla, as you get off the 'Rayalaseema Express' you see in front the C.C.I. Cement factory. In Chilamakuru, as you alight from the bus, you see on the road and on either side of the road- the bustle of another Coromandal cement factory under construction.

The Chilamakur road, which had not seen many jeeps and cars, had a number of cars frequently plying on it now. On the road full of potholes, a number of trucks plied to the factory site with loads of stones. On the trucks, just like the stones, were men and women.

On both sides of the road there were new shops. In shops where till recently no other cigarettes were available except Charminar and Scissors, even brands like the Red Wills could be spotted. It seemed the brandy shops had not yet made their appearance. Vegetables, groceries, eatables, tea, coffee, clothes, soaps, toothpaste, were all in a disarray in a single shop or in different shops.

The road was bustling with people waiting for buses, idlers, and with others connected with the factory workers. The changes that could not be brought about by years of agricultural activities, rain-dependent commercial crops, and stone quarries were evident now. And amidst the changed environment was the Gramina Bank; amidst these changes were the people of two, three languages.

I could not see any one from my village on the road. I took the dirt track off the road, the path across the fields.

Around me were the fields, hundreds of acres of fields, the 'mother land' that had changed several hands. Sales and

familial divisions spilt the 'mother earth', the 'goddess earth' amidst mud bunds.

Though much of the soil was tilled, no sowing was done... almost all the fields were a wasteland...looking up at the sky, famished ... 'tilled fallow land', no rains, no crops.

In the fields there were no corn, no millet, no safflower, and no groundnuts.

What was the point in sowing anything? Scattered here and there, even before they attained half a span in height. The groundnuts were burnt into ashes like infants in death. If there were at least a couple of rains in time, by now the fields would have come alive with cool green crop hiding the bunds. Now only the bunds were visible, bare like their lives ahead!

Famine again. Partners in the famished lives. I could not remember how many famines went by. Would counting solve problems?

Below my feet was the land, like a whole street of burnt down dwellings and belongings. Above me was the sky like a mound of ash. An occasional cloud could be seen in the sky. Clouds, like the fluff of infested cotton exposed to the wind, peeping out of the sun-cracked-rind, cracked because of inadequate rains. There was not a single crow in the sky. Not a single man was seen on the dirt track. Instead of a southwest breeze sweeping over the fields, it was a wind like in windy days.

I never thought that the famine would be so severe that year. I remembered the news in the newspapers and the announcements issued by various people. In all my life I had not seen any change in the promises made by people and the press-notes they released.

In this terrible famine what made me travel all the way to this place from Hyderabad? Did I have to come running here on getting a letter from Angadi Subbarayudu? Hope...necessity...

What was left of the ancestral property... the two-acre grove that I had, when I sold it off to my cousin Veeranna four years ago, the ties with my village had not yet snapped off; the last bond with my land. In the next couple of days, if the work was completed, I would have nothing to do with this land any more.

Four years ago Veeranna wanted to buy my two-acre land next to his grove. Instead of selling the land that shared the well with many to someone else and create trouble for Veeranna, I thought it was better to sell it to him. By the time Veeranna managed to sell his four acres of dry land, he was pestered by debtors. He was left with two thousand rupees. He put the two thousand in my hands as surety and got the sale deed written. As soon as his two-year-old lemon grove gave him the crop he promised to pay me the remaining eight thousand rupees. Till then, it was decided that he would cultivate the land on contract. But since then neither was the contract honoured nor did the registration of the land take place. I was in need of money. My third daughter's marriage was fixed. Veeranna didn't respond to my letters. I had decided to see him during the harvest time. It was then that I got Angadi Subbarayudu's letter. It said that Veeranna had given up farming, that he had sold away his grove that he had taken to bad ways that Subbarayudu wanted to buy my land.

The letter didn't give any details. It looked all tangled. I couldn't understand what happened to Veeranna's lime grove, why he had to sell it away. Though the family was in a bad shape, I hadn't imagined that things were that bad.

Reading the letter, my wife hurried me up. After all she is a woman. This affair seemed to be a rough one. Even if I deducted the contract money, I would still be left with a thousand rupees. Would Veeranna give up the land? Would he take back the deposit? How could I ask him to take it back? But what about my need? How would I manage in these hard days? Was it Angadi Subbarayudu's ploy?

I felt vexed. I was nearing the village. I remembered the fields, puddles and hillocks I roamed about in rains and in crop season. It's difficult to escape the attachment. Though I knew that in drought areas prices wouldn't go up much, for years I postponed selling my land. Perhaps I could do so, as I managed to make ends meet with my salary. If I didn't have education and a job, what would have happened to me in a place like this, the very thought was scary.

On the outskirts of the village, on the platform around the neem tree, I didn't find Pullayya as usual. The old man always pulled the leg of salaried people. I felt relieved. I didn't find even half of the usual community life on that platform. In my childhood people used to make coir ropes there. Women and children used to come with winnows full of grain and flock around the carts loaded with goods that came from outside the village. Children played with tops and played '*puttachendu*' with the ball made of cloth. We, the children used to tell and listen to stories till late in the night. Erikalayya *abba*, the storyteller was dead now. The rest of my friends were people who depended on their lands. I had no idea how they managed their lives. It was four years since I had met them, at least a few of them used to be there on the platform at this hour. Now I found two youngsters looking at the *matka* chart. I couldn't recall whose children they were, nor could they recognise me. Who would know me who always went there as a visitor once in a couple of years? It was over twenty years since I had left the village.

At the temple in the middle of the village I didn't find the rest of the community as usual. It was there that the *Vemanas*, mendicants, saints and sophists, street-performers and puppeteers used to take shelter. The villagers rehearsed mythological plays there. For a few years the school too was housed in the temple. It was in front of the temple that the goats used to be sacrificed. It was there that the weddings of frogs used to be performed to usher in rains. The recitation of *Virata parvam* used to take place there. *Bhajans* were sung there. On Sree Rama Navami it was there that *panakam* the sweet drink with red sugar, used to be distributed. The *molakala punnami*, advent of the season of cultivation used to be observed there. It was there that the *'gilakala kotlata'* the rattle-fight used to be staged. It was there that the people who came for flowers got acquainted with new people. It was there that the Village munsiff Revenue officials camped. It was there in my childhood that I heard someone reading Kasinatha's Andhra Patrika to a group of people, and listened to their discussions. When I was in the final year in school I listened to the politics of the Congress and the Communist parties. The rock carved out and placed on the cairn to hoist the flag on the day of Independence was lying there uncared for, just like the dilapidated temple.

During the harvest season the discussion of the prospects of the crops of people in the village used to take place there. The decision about the cattle that strayed into fields took place there. It was there that punishments were meted out to thieves. It was there that all the affairs of village took place. It was in the premises of the temple that my father lost the thirty acres of land and the house in *mangatai*, the card game with high stakes.

A boy sitting at that temple asked me, "Have you brought today's newspaper?'

"Whose paper?" I asked.

"Who gets newspaper in this village? I wondered if you've brought one", he said looking uncomfortable.

"I have yesterday's Telugu Newspaper."

"Give me that," he took it from me.

I wondered if it was a thirst for news or the reading habit of the educated. No signs of life in the street.

Looked as if there was an exodus from the village. Only children, no adults were seen even on the stoeps outside houses. How changed the village looked! Would they all be sitting curled up inside their homes with no zest? With no signs of rains, even the community life normally brought out by superstitions in such times could not be seen.

Veeranna was not at home. His wife Ramalakshmamma was grinding the *jowar*. She was surprised to see me. She went in and returned with some water for me to wash my feet. She laid the string-cot on the veranda, spread a torn quilt on it and asked me to sit. I sat down.

Ramalakshmamma made inquiries about my welfare. Looking around assessing their life, I mumbled my responses.

'I'll be back soon, *bawa*," Ramalakshmamma said and went out. It didn't look like a farmer's house. It looked like a house rented out to a schoolteacher. There were no bullocks in the cattle enclosure, no farm implements, and no buffaloes. No husk, no straw on the loft. Only a couple of fowl were strutting around. What Angadi Subbarayudu wrote seemed to be true. It really looked like Veeranna had given up farming.

Ramalakshmamma brought something hidden under the hem of her sari. 'I'll get some coffee for you, wait *bawa*', she took some firewood sticks from the enclosure for cattle and went inside. She came back after half an hour with coffee. It

was sweetened with jaggery, and was smelling of smoke. I understood the trouble she had, making it.

" Is Veeranna not in the village?" I asked.

Ramalaksmamma was quiet for a while. Then she hesitantly told me because she had to. "After returning from Prodduturu he started going to the cement factory. Of late, many from the village have started going to the factory. Our plight cannot really be put into words, *bawa*".

Her voice cracked. I didn't ask her another question. But I didn't understand what she meant by 'on returning from Prodduturu' and decided to ask Veeranna leisurely.

"Let me heat some water for you. The pot is empty. I'll get some." Ramalakshmamma was about to go out with the pot.

"I'd like to go into the village. Don't cook food for me."

I anticipated her insisting on my staying back, and so without waiting for a response I walked out.

It was not even ten o'clock in the morning. Veeranna won't be back till it was evening. In those circumstances I felt embarrassed to visit anyone. I didn't know how I would manage if I had to stay back there for a couple of days. Considering their living condition, it was unfair to thrust myself on Veeranna. He might be my relative, but there were others too. When my father was alive we didn't have good relationship with them. The enmity was of the times of my great grandfathers. After that it stretched further when we had to share the depleting water in the well. It didn't end up in breaking of heads, but they fought like dogs at the well. They let the crops go dry. They let the lemon trees in fruition go dry. They used to meet at weddings or at death ceremonies. The cordiality was confined to auspicious ceremonies and on occasions of births and deaths, that's all. The rest of the times it was as usual. But because of my

education and job after my father's death they had no problem with me. Therefore we were on talking terms. They would invite me for lunches if I were in the village. I decided to pay and get my food arranged in Angadi Subbarayudu's house for the couple of days I stayed there.

Subbarayudu was at the shop. His house doubled up as a shop as well. Including the kerosene drum in the corner for oil engines, the entire shop wouldn't be more than a thousand rupees worth. No shirt, only a soiled, torn loincloth around his waist. He hadn't had a shave and looked the very picture of poverty. There was a bunch of keys on the string round his waist. The moment you looked at him and the way he sold his wares you would know that it was humanly not possible to earn money with such dedication, only saints were capable of such a feat. As soon as he saw me he placed a plank on the box with *jowar* grains and asked me to sit on it. While he was handing over children balloons, or condiments or something else worth five or ten paise, he started inquiring after my welfare and quietly said, "Shall I get food cooked for you, or do you want to go to Veeranna's?"

"Get it cooked".

He got up and went in to give instructions. Subbarayudu's wife came out to greet me. Subbarayudu said softly, 'Veeranna asked me to buy the land."

"Let Veeranna come, we will talk about it," I said.

Even before our short conversation headed towards a conclusion, my uncle's son Munireddy came to the shop. He saw me and expressed his annoyance, as I didn't go to his house first. "I was about to leave for your house now," I lied. "Have lunch with us."

"Let him eat here now, take him home for dinner and treat him to chicken." Subbarayudu teased him. "At least come and have coffee with us," he forced me.

My cousin Munireddy *anna* gave me coffee and appraised me of the conditions; politics, educational situation, and other things about the village for two hours. It was boring, tales of one who thinks he knows everything. He never asked me about myself. I couldn't take it any more and told him about my work. At first he disapproved of my selling away of the land. Then he asked me a number of questions like, " what do you do with your salary? How much have you saved? For how much have you insured?" and so on. I told him about my daughter Prasuna's impending wedding. He asked me about the boy's education, job, how much was the dowry and so on.

"In these difficult famine days where do you get the right price, perhaps you'll have to sell it cheap to Angadi Subbarayudu", he said.

"I'll talk about the sale only after Veeranna comes" I said.

Then he told me about Veeranna.

"He has brought a bad name to all of us, a bad name for the fellow *kapus* in the village. Think of our family. Because he was a relative in difficult times I asked him to be a farm hand with me. He was greedy. He didn't agree to it. He was influenced by the useless people of Kamanur and joined the 'brothel company'. If only he had behaved well there it would have been all right. He sold off his two-acre land and even before he settled all his debts as if there was no other good place, he left for Chilakaluripeta with the two thousand rupees he was left with. He brought along two whores who ran away on the pretext of going into the field to relieve themselves. He is spoilt in all respects. I don't know what has come over him. People say that he doesn't get on with his brothers-in-law. I heard that he was beaten up by the police one day. Now he has come back and has been going to the cement factory. While the famine has been worrisome, we have this factory ruining the farmers. They can get fifteen rupees wages a day at the factory. How can a farmer afford

to pay that much? Now nobody agrees to work even for five rupees. Even women got used to going there. They get ten rupees. Now all of us have to sell off our land. The time is close when the labourers here and from the neighbouring places are likely to buy up all our land..."

It was not that Munireddy *anna* did not know how much land the labourers could afford to buy. If people like Angadi Subbarayudu were coming forward it was because they were a sort of philosophers. Whatever be the problems of a fifty-acre landowner Munireddy, I was upset to know about Veeranna. Fifteen years ago he owned twenty acres of land. As far as I knew, he did not have a single addiction.

I told Munireddy *anna* that I would be back in the evening and started off to Subbarayudu's place. On the way I met another relative of mine who commented, "Salaried people like you and the labourer fellows seem to be doing well." He was a big farmer once but not now, though the arrogance remained.

We sat for our lunch at Subbarayudu's.

"I thought you must have got tired of eating rice, so I asked them to make *sangati* for you instead of rice." Subbarayudu perhaps was being tactful but *sangati* was all right with me. But I lost the habit of eating garlic and hot chillies. There was no ghee. The buttermilk was rather weak. Subbarayudu had to economise thus, otherwise he couldn't afford to buy lands of those who had lost. I didn't know if I should feel pity for Subbarayudu or to get disgusted with his growing avarice for money.

I was not used to the afternoon nap. I felt like going to the temple. When I went there I saw that the newspaper I gave in the morning was being shared by a few. Seemed it was a rare thing for them.

A young man came and sat next to me. I could recognise him. Pullama Nayudu's son. He said he was studying for his

B.A. He said as if addressing someone else, "Cuddapah district is declared a famine area by the government... as if it ceases to be a famine stricken place if a Collector or some ministers don't declare so. Shameless people. So many years after independence, they are not able to solve the problem of drinking water. If we turn towards Telugu Desam Party, why shouldn't we? Unless all the farmers vote for Telugu Desam this time we can't teach a lesson to the Congress."

The boy who borrowed my paper in the morning gave just a short response.

"Congress party is like the Hindu religion. Just like it has swallowed all the other religions, the Congress will swallow up Telugu Desam and a myriad other parties. We have seen the Janatha party then, so do we, now. What we need is not a party that is swallowed up nor the ones which swallow the others."

"You and your communist talk..."

"What about you..."

I didn't know how to control what was going to end up in a fight. Their agitation was palpable. It appeared to me that they were not aware that politics is not mere agitation. The boy who compared the Congress party with the Hindu religion had brains, had honesty. Pullama Naidu's son didn't have that quality. Wind-blown politics. I was about to give my opinion and Subbarayudu's son came with the message, 'father wants you'.

Handing me the unpalatable coffee, Subbarayudu said, "Were you at the temple all this while? All the worthless fellows gather there these days. Of late the place has become a shelter for those young men who had been educated to get a degree at the cost of their lands. You could see all those crazy unemployed brats there. They keep playing *matka* and keep abusing others."

How could I argue with him? He continued on that note for a while, and then said, "What do we do now?"

"Let Veeranna come. O.k., you tell him. If he agrees, you can buy the land", I said.

Subbarayudu poured out all his problems. He sympathised with me on my need for money. He told me about the village affairs, that even a person like Munireddy had debts to clear and gave an account of how much he owed to who, that there was no one in the village who could buy land, who was leading what kind of life, and that there was a dearth of farm labour. After telling me all that, he said, "I can't give you even a single naya paisa more than six thousand. You may check with your Munireddy *anna*."

The land that was sold for ten thousand rupees four years ago, he was asking it for six thousand rupees. In Subbarayudu's eyes did the value of rupee go up or down? Just a while ago when someone haggled for a piece of coconut he said, 'what do I do with prices shooting up?" Now, famine and my urgency made him bring down the value of the land. I felt lost.

"Let Veeranna come back, let's talk in the evening", I said.

"So be it, what's the hurry", said Subbarayudu confidently.

At nightfall Veeranna returned. He fussed around me and talked about dinner with chicken and all. I told him that Munireddy *anna* had asked me for dinner. "Won't you eat at poor people's home?" his wife expressed her hurt. What could I tell her?

I broached the topic with Veeranna. He listened to everything and said quietly, "Sell it to Subbarayudu." he brought out the sale deed he had preserved carefully and put it in my hands. I did not know what to say. At last I

gathered my courage and said, " I'll somehow manage Prasuna's wedding. Otherwise whatever will be, will be. Keep the land to yourself. Pay me whenever you can."

"How can I? Where will I get money? You're educated. Are you crazy? Do you want me to trust the famine? Or should I have trust in Subbarayudu? What should I do if I am denied of my share of the well water? If I were to be told that they wouldn't switch on the engine for a day, what should be my plight? I don't have bullocks, or any farm implements. On what strength do you want me to take the land? After I took charge of the lands I depended on it for twenty years. What did I get out of it?

I am yet to repay fifteen hundred to Subbarayudu... loan to the government... "

"You still haven't...?"

"Bewildered by all these loans I went to Proddututu. I did something no other farmer would have done. I fetched water in the brothels, carried food packets for them, and I supplied liquor and brandy bottles for their customers, sent the whores to the police, was beaten up in false raids... and I wanted to start a brothel, but got duped. I knew I was not fit for it. Throughout my stay there, everyday I died of shame fearing that I would encounter some known face. At last I returned to the village. Though I don't have the land I have two hands to work with. Now we have the factory, for people like me."

"It's a matter of two or three years. Once the construction is over what will people like you do? So..."

"So you want me to take up cultivation again? I don't want land or anything. In fact there's something else you don't understand. Suppose I take up cultivation again, what about my debts to Subbarayudu, the government, to you,

and Subbarayudu will ask me to mortgage for the loan. Then he'll take it. The two acres that you want to give me will be lost to Subbarayudu. The ten thousand rupees that I owe you will become twenty. In fact Subbarayudu doesn't want to invest more than six thousand rupees. You can't do anything about it. You have to agree to it. I will not get back the money I had given as surety. Subbarayudu will take it against the loan. Since Munireddy *anna* is under Subbarayudu's thumb, he too would support Subbarayudu. Neither you nor I can help it. Now, what do you say?"

What could I say? The transaction was over that very night. Munireddy *anna* could manage to finalise the deal for three hundred rupees more.

"I'll pay you four thousand now. Once I get the collections after the harvest, I'll pay the remaining two thousands. In fact I would've paid you the entire amount now but Munireddy *anna* was in need and I had to loan it to him. In the next three months I will deduct the thirteen hundred that you owe Veeranna, and pay you the reminder two thousand seven hundred", said Subbarayudu. I agreed.

These calculations are unending.

The last link with my land and the village was snapped.

Till past midnight Veeranna was telling me about the village, about the factory, in fact, more about the factory. He told me how the rich were duping the farmers in acquiring land for the factory. He told me about the feuds between the Tamil labourers and the Telugu labourers, about the strike, the union that was formed recently, and the strike for higher wages.

It was daybreak. I started along with the workers going to the factory. I had nothing to do with the place now. On my way to Hyderabad I wanted to go to the groom's place

in Tirupati to tell them that I was not ready to arrange the wedding yet.

Veeranna was walking ahead of me. Along with him were some twenty farmers who had to fall into debt because of the famine. People on the famine stricken land, walking towards the factory...

Above us was the sky in a hue that was a mixture of cement and powdered bones.

Somewhere, from some corner, a red streak...

The Donors

'Of all the charities the charity of food is the greatest'. 'Don't bite the hand that feeds you'. 'As you sow, so you reap'. My grandfather reminded us of these proverbs at least ten times a day.

Perhaps that's why my mother used to say that because he gave away some to others he could amass so much wealth.

My grandfather had a lot of property. There was not a single person in Prodduturu who wouldn't know Nichenametla Venkatesam. My grandfather was known as a millionaire. But my grandfather always said modestly, "What am I worth, there are others richer than me."

My grandfather had a big grocery in the big market. He had the biggest hosiery in the town. He had a brandy shop in the small market. He had a petrol station near the bus station. He had an oil mill. He had a cotton mill. He had a big commission business. He was also building a cinema hall. What more would those richer people that my grandfather referred to have, I wondered.

Before my father died my mother also used to feed the beggars. I could not understand why we didn't get so much property as my grandfather had. My grandfather studied up to fifth class like me. My father was a graduate. When I asked my mother, she said, "Your father did not have worldly wisdom."

"But you too never said 'no' to others." I said.

"I must have committed some sin in my previous birth. It's our fate." She said.

My mother always spoke about rebirth, good and bad deeds, fate and so on. I didn't understand these things.

What I understood by then was, that my father died when I was young, that he never stuck to a job, that he was a very straight forward person, that whatever we had was spent on his illness. I did not know what disease he contracted. My mother was my grandfather's brother's daughter. After my father's death we didn't have anybody. My Venkatesam grandpa gave us shelter. My mother always said that we were indebted to my grandfather. Indebted means to have debt. We didn't incur any debt from my grandfather. In fact, he had taken from us.

It was my mother who did all the work in grandpa's house. It was she who cooked for all.

One of my aunts never got off her bed. She had a strange disease; whenever she went on a visit to the doctor she dressed up very well. The other two aunts never did any chores at home. All that they did was to peer at themselves in the mirror a few times, do some stitching, read some magazines, listen to music, and keep on munching something. My aunts' children went to schools.

My mother had to look after all of them.

I had to do all the biddings of my grandpa and uncles.

When we moved into my grandpa's home, first they put me in the 'commission office'. My job was to sweep the floors, fetch tea or coffee when asked to. I was eleven years old then.

My uncle used to sit on quilts, leaning against bolsters. He used to talk on two phones, both in Hindi and Telugu. The Bombay *seths* used to visit him. Later I understood that in the commission business one could get a lot of money talking to people. Late in the nights some people used to visit my uncle. I used to fetch brandy for them. I used to

bring kebabs from a place near Gangamma temple. Meat was not allowed inside the house. My uncle used to eat it outside in the evenings. My grandfather was very pious. Piety means worshipping and all that!

After a couple of years they put me in the oil mill. My job was that of an errand boy. I used to look at the boys going to high school and I too wanted to study.

Whenever I expressed the desire to her, my mother used to say, "What did your father gain by education? If you get into business you can earn a lot like your grandfather. Learn the work. If you earn your grandfather's confidence he would teach you the trade and also give you a share in the business. You can climb up the ladder. Our troubles would come to an end."

For three years I had been learning the trade. Of late they had started asking me to keep an account of the weight of the sample peanuts weighed to assess the oil content. They asked me to keep an account of the peanut pods. By the way, uncle weighed things well. When he stood near the balance, for some reason the merchants used to grumble that it weighed less. They would ask 'why he was cheating those who trusted him'. My uncle used to say that it was possible to cheat only those who trusted and not those who didn't. Both got the profits. Hence nobody really complained. But only the merchants knew the tricks of the balance and not the farmers. They never had any balance at home. It was always an approximation for them. Moreover many of the farmers sold the goods in their own barns using the crude wooden balances. Only businessmen came to the mill.

Everyday, the sample nuts used to be included in the charity account. It would amount to about ten thousand rupees every year. They would deduct one rupee per a hundred for the entire earnings of the company. I still didn't know those accounts.

Grandfather used to spend all that was included in the charity account at Tirupati. He would put some money into the *hundi* at the temple. Some he would spend on the officials there. On every Diwali he fed the poor. On SriRama Navami festival he arranged offerings of *panakam* etc., and also arranged *Harikatha*. Once grandpa alone donated fifty thousand rupees for the *ammavaru* shelter. He earned a name as a pious person. Last Dassera, a lyricist wrote lyrics in praise of grandpa and distributed them among people. My grandpa liked such lyricists in the town. They used to visit him often. My grandpa used to give them some money from the charity account.

Two years passed. My grandfather hadn't yet given me a share in the business. Both my mother and me were scared to ask him.

Once, my grandpa was very ill. He was bedridden. My mother looked after him for several days. One day he said tearfully, "I'll be indebted to you for ever, Subbamma." My mother wept. She looked at me and wept. Grandpa died that day. My mother wept more than anyone else in the house.

On the thirteenth day after his death, the poor were fed. I had never seen such hunger on the streets. A marble memorial was built for grandpa in the garden on the outskirts of the town. The charity –house built in his memory was also made of polished stones.

I didn't know what happened, but within a year of grandpa's death uncles divided the property. On the day the property was being divided, my mother asked uncles if grandpa had said anything about me before his death. At first nobody spoke. The younger uncle arranged a job for me for a wages of two hundred rupees per month. My mother and I moved into a hut.

At least once a day my mother used to abuse my grandpa for not having done anything about our future. She was

worried about me. If only he had given me at least a paisa of share in the business my future would have been taken care of, she said. How could it happen? My mother was not grandpa's own child.

As a distant relative from my aunt's family arrived from Markapuram they moved me to the mill. My job was to supervise the workers at the expeller and the decanter.

On the very day I joined the mill one worker sifting the grains commented, "His grandfather was a generous man. If he were alive he would have given him a share."

Ramanayya who was working at the decorticator laughed and said, "The grandfather was not generous nor were the uncles. This man is destined to be only a labourer above other labourers."

I got irritated at Ramanayya's mockery. I said harshly, "Pay attention to your work. The belt has snapped, take care."

Ramanayya didn't stop laughing. He set right the belt and said, "I thought you are one of us and talked light-heartedly. Don't learn your grandpa and uncles' language. They are what they are and we are what we are."

I became more angry. But Ramanayya's cheerful face made me restrain myself. Ramanayya must be about five years older than me. I silently moved away from there.

I was thinking of Ramanayya's words for the whole day. What was the difference between Ramanayya or any other worker and me? Ramanayya was paid more than me. I was not superior to Ramanayya in any way, except in caste. That night my mother grumbled about grandpa as usual, that he didn't give a share nor did he get me married. I did not know what overcame me; I started abusing grandpa, uncles and all the moneyed people.

After that my mother did not grumble about my grandpa in my presence. After that I did not speak harshly with the workers. Once my uncle shouted at me for spoiling the workers by giving them too much liberty.

I didn't become a millionaire, nor did I get married and my mother died. Rangayya uncle who had not raised my salary even by one *dhammidi* bore all the expenses of the thirteenth-day rituals after my mother's death. If only he had raised my salary my mother would have had better food and would have lived longer.

My lonely life sought the company of Ramanayya. Through Ramanayya I came to know many things. I married Ramanayya's sister working at the cotton mill. With that the remaining bondage of caste with my grandfather's family was snapped. After I got married I asked for a raise. Saying he was incurring losses in the flour mill and that it was only losses in other business as well, he reluctantly raised my salary by ten rupees.

In that month was my grandfather's death anniversary. The poor were fed in a big way, and *Harikatha* was arranged.

The next day Esu died in an accident working at the expeller. They decided that it was due to Esu's fault. My older uncle spoke with the officers, they said. As compensation they gave a thousand rupees to the family of six children and the two old parents of Esu. Esu had been working in the mill for twenty five years.

Ramanayya went straight to my uncle...no...to the owner of the mill, and demanded, "Isn't Esu worth at least one thousandth of your dead father?", and much more.

"You people bite the hand that feeds you" shouted Rangayya at Ramanayya."As you sow so you reap" he cursed. That was the language of my grandfather, it was clear.

Ramanayya was fired. There was a strike. Rangayya closed down the mill. There was chaos. Mediation, discussions....I witnessed the troubles of the workers. I experienced it all.

Meanwhile the minister inaugurated the new industry Rangayya started in the industrial estate. The name given was 'Nichenametla Venkatesam and Sons Flour Mill.' There was feeding of the poor in my grandfather's name. There was an announcement in the meeting that they were starting an orphanage. There were appreciatory advertisements, lyrics... like father like son... Rangayya was also generous...they belong to the family of Karna and emperor Sibi....

The oil mill had been closed since three months.

A thousand workers, men and women, children, old and young all of them started off... not for any festival feast, not for any food after funeral ...but for work...justice...When I joined them they said I was not faithful...it's true...I was happy for not being a dog.

The Pitch

We thought that each would go his own way in life. We even felt unhappy that it may not be possible for all four of us to meet again in future. The four years of our B.Tech studies in Kanpur passed off very happily. None of us dreamt that we would get an opportunity to work in one place later in life. Abdullah was from Jammu, Sethu Madhavan was from Tanjore, Deshpande belonged to Pune and I was from Tenali. Al of us belonged to one country, but we didn't know where we would be getting our jobs.

But truth is greater than imagination. All four of us got jobs in a remote place in Cuddapah district. We got jobs in a new cement factory owned by an industrialist in Bombay. It was good that all four of us did not take the same branch of study. Deshpande and me did Mechanical, Abdullah was in Electrical and Sethu Madhavan took up Civil. We were excited that we would earn experience in different branches of the cement factory, that it would help us build our future, that we had a bright future ahead of us. We joined on the same day. We wished to get promotion on the same day.

We were surprised to see our work field. It was a black desert. A jungle of stone slabs. It was neither a town nor a village. All the houses were stone buildings. The house allotted to us was a thousand pillar temple. There was no toilet, no water, and no ventilation. But there was electricity. The hotels there could be called by any other name. Even the newspapers were supplied only occasionally. However it was better than the villages in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. There was no fear of dacoits. People were friendly. Only the language sounded harsh. They were not very civil

and addressed everyone as 'you' in singular form. They didn't have honorific 'you' in their dialect. I was familiar with it in the days when my father was an executive engineer in Cuddapah. I was studying for my Intermediate then. Since the other three friends of mine didn't know Telugu there was no problem. But Abdullah could understand that the muslims there addressed each other as *thu* and *thum* but not *aap*. In a month we got used to the place and the work.

I think it happened in the evening one day. All for of us were having coffee at a kiosk which was part of a store. A young man sitting on the stone platform in front was staring at me. He seemed to be hesitating to talk to me. I too didn't recall where I had met him. After a while he made bold and addressed me. "You....aren't you Prakasam? I was your classmate in the Intermediate."

Then I remembered. He was Chandra. During the days of my Intermediate studies he was one of my good friends. He had grown thin in these five years, so I couldn't immediately recognise him. I apologised to him for that. I liked him a lot those days. I introduced my three friends to him.

In the course of our conversation I learnt that he belonged to the neighbouring village and that he discontinued his education after doing his B. Com. As the cement factory occupied the four acres of land that belonged to them, he was offered the job of a clerk in the factory as compensation. He commuted from his village everyday. He invited us to his village. We became friends once again.

On a holiday we went to Chandra's village. They were very hospitable. In the modern civilized world of ours I had never seen such a simple natured hospitality. That night we stretched ourselves on cots in moonlight in the front yard of the house. About fifteen people came to meet us. All of them worked at the factory.

After they left, Chandra said, "You see, all of them had some land here. Drought made them lose everything and they were in debts. They sold off the lands as the land didn't yield anything. Now they have become labourers. We don't know what would happen once the work at the factory comes to an end. They are not skilled labourers. They can carry sand and break stones..."

Chandra went on talking in that tone for a long time. There was pain and anger hidden in his words. It was a new world for me, a new experience. It was not an easy problem to understand at the first instance. Abdullah, Sethu and Pande were long asleep. They never took anything to heart. Chandra, who never bothered about anything in the days of Intermediate studies, frightened me with his talk. I lied to him that I was feeling sleepy. Chandra stopped talking. But I couldn't sleep well that night.

In the last six months Chandra became very close to us. He occasionally came to our room in the evenings. He used to sleep there. It felt good to listen to him. Listening to him made me feel scared. But I was attracted by the genuineness of his face, and the sincerity in his talk made me think.

One day Sethu warned me that Chandra was a dangerous fellow and that we should avoid him.

"What's so dangerous about him?" I asked him.

Sethu started telling me. He told me that he had connections with treacherous trade unions. He alleged that he was creating problems between the Tamil and Telugu workers. I didn't believe him. I wanted to ask Chandra about it but he didn't want me to do so.

But after a week there was a fight between the Tamil workers and the local workers. The locals bashed up the Tamil workers. A couple of them were seriously injured. Their huts were razed to the ground. Rumours spread in the village. No one knew the truth. Some said it started with a

Tamil worker attempting to rape a Telugu girl. Some others said it was because of some skirmish to do with money lending.

For the first time Sethu said, "You Telugu people, though you are not capable of anything you are arrogant. Tamils are skilled workers. You are jealous of them. Are the Tamils behaving like this with the Telugus in Madras?"

During our student days we used to take such talk lightly. Once Sethu said, "Our literature is the most ancient in the entire country. Ours is a very great civilization. We had trade with other countries in the world even before Christ. You can see the influence of our culture in Malaysia, in Indonesia, in Sri Lanka."

'Yes, even today they are the oldest; the caste mark on Sethu's forehead is the proof of it. He spoils our sleep early in the morning with his devotional chanting." The Bengali friend Sen used to tease Sethu, but it never affected our friendship those days. Now I felt Sethu was speaking a new language.

I met Chandra alone and asked him the details, because he was a local person. Once he had argued with me that the local people must get more number of jobs in the factory. Sethu had told me that Chandra was present in the place where the trouble started. Sethu had also told me that his people had told him that Chandra provoked the people to start the trouble. I wanted Chandra to explain. Chandra did not beat around the bush.

"It's a lie that I was there. It's true that I've connections with the trade unions. Anyone who wants the welfare of the workers would not appreciate such skirmishes. Nobody with the right senses would get involved in such things. Actually the problem was because of a communication gap rising out of the difference in languages. The whole thing was given a new colour. The local businessmen were jealous because the shop owned by a Tamil was making good business. But you

must understand a truth. Sethu is using his language affinity with the Tamils for his own benefit. He loans money on huge interest," Chandra said.

But I did not probe into the matter. I believed in Chandra. I also observed Chandra being close to the Tamil workers. Once when a Tamil worker met with an accident, the concern Chandra and his fellow workers showed for him couldn't be explained in words.

After a month Sethu moved into a rented house. He told me that he had fixed a Tamil woman to cook for him. Meanwhile Pande moved into another house shared by a couple of Marathi engineers. He told me that he had fixed up a Marathi cook and that the Telugu food didn't suit him. Till then he was not aware of his brahminism. Pande had changed. He started moving about only with the Marathi officers in the factory.

When Sethu and Pande moved out of the room Abdullah felt unhappy. But he kept quiet. I reminded him of our Kanpur days. Whenever we went to the city, all four of us went. If only two seats were vacant in the auto we would wait for one with four seats.

Digging work for buildings of the factory was on. One day an idol was excavated. That's it. Contributions poured in. The management contributed a huge amount. The building for a small temple started.

Abdullah was irritated that. "How is it that the Hindu gods become stone idols and are found everywhere? As if the stones for the cement factory were not enough! Ok, but all the workers are not Hindus alone. There are muslims also. There are Christians like you. Don't muslims need a mosque? Don't Christians need a church?"

Should a democracy be like what Abdullah described? I didn't understand the big words.

About a month after what Abdullah spoke to me, building of a mosque also started. The management contributed money for that too. Local muslims came forward with more.

I was amused. 'Suppose I too encourage the local Christians?' I thought. I remembered that I was a harijan. No, my grandfather was a harijan. From my grandfather's generation we had been harijan-christians. I didn't know how, but a small church started taking shape. The factory management gave donations for that too.

When the Hindu temple work started I remembered what Chandra had said, "Watch out, there will be a church and a mosque too. The industrialists will encourage it by donating money. What they want is not personal freedom of religion but blind faith and walls between religions."

At that time I remembered all the communal riots that took place in Kanpur when I was studying there. I remembered what happened in Hyderabad. Luckily such things didn't happen here. They hadn't yet degenerated to that level.

Abdullah too moved into another room. Each one was in his own world. The friendship we had when we came to the place was almost over. But we were still on speaking terms. I reflected on it. My mind was in a turmoil.

Chandra started spending more time with me than in his village. When the topic about the friendship among the four of us came up, Chandra commented, "The real reason is the ambition to be in the good books of the officers of the factory and to climb up the ladder. Our friends are trying their best to do so. Have you noticed, of late, Sethu and Abdullah have been treating Deshpande to parties and giving him a lot of importance? The Chief Engineer of constructions is a relative of Deshpande. These days you put friendships and relationships on a balance!"

I got worried with these words. They'll get promotions before me. I'll have to work as their junior. I almost felt jealous of them. 'Can't I provoke the local people through Chandra?' I thought. I could never be so smart.

It was during those days that the trade union called for a strike on the issue of wages and other problems of the workers.

The night before the strike there was a call from the Unit in-charge Santhoji. When I reached there I found all the three classmates of mine were already there. I was surprised. He wanted to speak to me alone and sent Sethu, Abdullah and Pande into another room. The doors were closed. I started trembling. But I put up a brave front. Rubbing his bald pate with one hand and fidgeting with the paper weight with the other, Santoji started his lecture in his American accent.

"You know about the strike. They are investing not millions but crores in this remote place. Why? They are thinking of a fertiliser factory apart from the cement factory. Why? Only for making profits? No. To help develop the underdeveloped place with our industry. But for this factory many would have been starving. We have given a compensation of ten thousand for a piece of land worth only three thousand rupees. How much progress has come with our factory! When we came here we couldn't even get a good blade. Now you can get even smuggled goods. The employees at the government establishments don't get the kind of facilities that we get here. Since the government knows the goals of private concerns, they give us licence. In about a year the production will start in the cement factory. You have a good future here. What do you think?"

What could I say? I smiled a wry smile. As if he was telling me a secret, Santoji said, "Chandra is a good friend of yours. He and his mentor, the leader of the trade union are behind this strike. The trade union leader doesn't have a

job. Being a factory employee Chandra is getting involved in these matters. Giving a raise of a couple of rupees is not the problem. But if we buckle under pressure the trade union will get stronger. Then the actual headache would begin. If Chandra crosses over to our side the strike would fizzle out. He is popular in and around the village. You must speak to Chandra. Both of you are Telugus. Moreover, I learn that he stays with you. That's good. If you do this for us I'll recommend your name for promotion. You may get a chance to go abroad..."

I was confused. More than me it seemed the unit in-charge knew how popular Chandra was among the workers. He seemed to know his worth. But would Chandra listen to me? I expressed my doubt to him.

"You must make him. If you bring a split among the hundred harijan workers, he would listen to you. You can do it easily."

I understood Santhoji's strategy. A strong bald pate! I didn't know what to say. I mumbled "I'll try."

"Ok, good boy," he patted me on the shoulders and said goodnight.

I could imagine what he could have told the other two. He must have asked Sethu to speak to the Tamil workers. Abdullah must have been asked to speak to the muslims. All three of us were shown the same bait. Promotions, foreign trips! For once I hated it all. What greed! How scheming! What treachery! I wanted to tell Chandra everything. Chandra who used to come even in the dead of the night never came that day.

In the morning as I was going to the work place, there were striking workers. There was determination on their faces which, until then looked innocent and poor. One song, one word, 'workers unity, up, up'. Some Tamil worker shouted, "Sethu Madhavan," and the chorus was "down,

down." A muslim youth shouted, "Abdullah" and other voices shouted, "*murdabad*". More slogans in chorus.

Amidst the slogans there was no difference between Telugu and Tamil workers. There was no caste differences, no communal differences. Were they all shouting slogans just for a raise of wages by two rupees? I won't believe that. It was a chorus, shouting for a beautiful future.

The crowd was marching ahead in one step.

But what were those who were educated and were in influential positions doing? What were the values ruling them?

My thoughts started taking shape.

Who Are They?

Those of us who belong to the discipline of Social Sciences often use the word 'clientele'. The social scientists say that we have to think of who the clientele are in a particular profession, business, arts, education, universities, libraries, even in the case of revolution there are clientele. Professionally I belong to that class.

Recently I had to write a research article on 'The Clientele Under the Jurisdiction of the Hyderabad Municipal Corporation Library: A Social Study'. I had to present it at a conference in Madras. I met Surekha and Mohan during that time. In fact, it was Surekha who was indirectly responsible for the inspiration to write the research paper. Mohan gave me all the help personally. All the Library Science scholars in the conference appreciated the research paper. They said a further study was necessary in the field. My reputation also got a boost. But I must admit that for some reason my enthusiasm for research got a set back. Even today I was not able to decide what type of clients Surekha and Mohan were. Listen to the story and tell me what you think.

Surekha is the little daughter of a big contractor - a neighbour of mine. The contractor was building a big house in Banjara Hills. In Srinagar Colony was their temporary camp. He had been our neighbour for six months. As soon as they came into our neighbourhood my wife somehow discovered that we were distant relatives and felt pleased with herself and wanted me to be pleased. I always held that caste and kinship alone are the proof of a sense of insecurity in the society. All the same, I cannot feel pleased with such

kinships, nor can I convince my wife about it. So it is better not to argue with her.

In fact I was happy with Surekha. Surekha who had completed her B.Com degree and was looking forward to her being married off. Though she was waiting to be married off, I was pleased to see that she had a thirst for knowledge. I was pleased to see her reading voraciously. In all these twenty years in my university I had hardly come across a dozen such students and half a dozen such teachers who read so avidly in the library. Even though it was not for any examination, whatever she read, whether they were the Telugu novels I had, or the books of Chase and other new wave English novels, she took them one at a time and returned them carefully. She returned them without spoiling even the covers. She returned them without tearing off the favourite pages from the books. She actually read all of them. As proof of having read them she used to discuss them with me on some Sunday. If the novel dealt with love and marriages, she would discuss them more avidly, as if we were discussing her problem.

One Sunday Surekha and me were discussing a novel, which was made into a movie. Then entered Mohan with a couple of books in hand. I introduced Mohan to Surekha, that he was working as a Proof Reader at the Lochana Printers, that he was studying for his M.A., that he was a short story writer. Perhaps it was for the first time that she was introduced to a writer, she was very happy. She expressed her happiness in the polite English acquired at the convent school. Mohan just smiled and was quiet. I spoke very highly of Surekha. I even told him that I wanted to write a research paper with Surekha's help. 'Fiction-client Surekha', I said with pride. It was then that Mohan said, 'In that case ask her to read my stories and give her opinion. I'll get some idea about the clientele of my stories. It might help me improve my writing culture.'

'I think I've read a couple of your stories.' Said Surekha trying to recollect.

'Now read these ten one after the other.' Mohan gave us each a complementary copy of his collection of short stories.

'You didn't tell me that you were bringing out a collection.' I said peevishly.

'The first complementary copy is yours' Mohan smiled.

'So I am the 'Sri' and Surekha is the dot.' I said.

'What's it?' asked Surekha.

'That's a rustic school concept. The first student that gets admission is called 'Sri' and the second is called the 'dot'. It seems you're brought up in Hyderabad.' Said Mohan.

Surekha smiled in response. She turned the discussion on the novel that was made into a film. She asked for Mohan's opinion.

'First of all tell me why you like the novel so much' Mohan asked.

Surekha was confused.

'All right, we can discuss this leisurely some time later. I'll come next Sunday.' Mohan got up to go.

I brought up the topic of my research paper and asked him if he could get me the material I wanted from the libraries within his reach.

'Tell me the process in which you want me to collect the materials and I'll surely get it for you.' He said.

'Tomorrow in the evening when you come to the university library I'll tell you.' I said.

After he left Surekha said, 'I'm going to read his stories today itself.'

Next Sunday... and the next and still another Sunday, two or three months passed. Whenever Surekha and Mohan met in my house they got into some discussion or the other. I don't remember if Surekha made even a single comment on

Mohan's stories. Mohan didn't talk about his stories to Surekha. They were stories of farmers in the village. I thought that since she didn't know that life she didn't want to discuss them with Mohan. But I understood that she looked forward to meeting Mohan on Sunday evenings. I noticed Mohan looking at her with love-filled eyes when Surekha spoke. I have this crazy belief that youth with tender feelings in the heart talk to each other with eyes. It was beyond doubt that theirs was a case of love. I wanted them to get married. I remembered that some time ago my wife spoke to me about the problem of Surekha's marriage.

'Even if they were ready to dole out three lakh rupees as dowry s it's a pity that she isn't getting a husband.' my wife told me. Perhaps because we didn't have daughters or may be because I wasn't aware of these problems I said, 'what's wrong with the people?' My wife rattled out some social sagas, caste concepts, and cost of living and so on. She told me about the problems of the contractor who was building a fifteen-lakh house at Banjara Hills. I got irritated, 'unless she wants only an engineer or doctor or an IAS officer, it won't be difficult to get a husband for Surekha.'

Whenever we had an argument between us I wanted to speak with the contractor about Mohan. When I told my wife, she said, 'the contractor is not like you to give her in marriage in defiance of caste, creed and financial position of the people.' I was silenced.

That day as soon as Mohan came Surekha asked him, 'Haven't you ever written a love story?'

Perhaps it was an unexpected question. Mohan seemed a little embarrassed. Then he said softly, 'So far, no. In fact I've written only about twenty stories. I don't have anything against it in particular. If I come across an ideal couple in love, I'll surely write about them.'

'What do you mean by 'ideal'? Surekha sought a clarification.

'I mean the culture where they respect each other's views. I mean a culture where they correct each other's shortcomings. A culture, which is above caste, religion, problems, and politics of today.

Surekha asked another difficult question rolling her eyes 'Has this culture anything to do with money?'

'Definitely, yes. But not a lot of money'

The expression 'a lot' in Mohan's response surprised me. Surekha was silent, I didn't know what was in her mind. To make the situation light, I said to Mohan with a smile, 'My wife and son were saying that people like you write trash. Why don't you write something good?'

'It's not fair. Mohangaru doesn't write trash. I only wanted to see how he would write love stories.' Said Surekha.

At last she spoke something about Mohan's stories.

'At least write for Surekha's sake.' I said to tease her.

'I'll surely write when the time comes.' Said Mohan.

After the incident, Mohan called on me a couple of Sundays. Then he disappeared. Surekha continued to visit us. But the usual cheerfulness was missing in her. I had a suspicion that something was wrong between them. Since the Press where Mohan worked printed a book of mine I knew them. I rang them up. They told me that he had left to join some other Publishers. After a week I got a magazine by post. There was a card enclosed. 'Read the story and also ask Surekhagaru to read it. I've paid her debt. I got married. I'll come back and give you all the details.' These were the few sentences in it.

I had not come across a young man who had taken marriage as something very casual and personal. I was also a little hurt that he didn't confide in me. I read his story 'Composing Love' in the magazine. It was about a young man working as a proof reader falling in love with a girl who

was working as a compositor. I was immensely impressed by the way they discussed the practical problems in the story. It was excellent, that's all I can say.

Because he wanted Surekha to read the story, I called her and gave her the magazine. I wondered if I should tell her that he got married. The younger generation is very mature. They may or may not know what exactly they want, but they surely contemplate a lot. I decided not to tell her.

Next day when she returned the magazine I asked Surekha, 'Because you asked him, he has written a love story. How's it?'

'Perhaps he thought that there's a great culture only in the love between proof readers and the compositors!' was the only comment from her.

She left without giving me a chance to respond to her comment. I couldn't understand whether there was satire, anger, and arrogance or hurt pride in it. I was busy with my research paper and my trip to Madras, and couldn't pay attention to anything else. On my return from Madras I learnt two things: Surekha was getting married. The boy worked as an engineer and the dowry was five lakhs.

I learnt that Mohan called along with his wife. 'What if she is just a compositor, Mohan's wife is pretty' was my wife's fond comment.

My wife gave another punch line too, 'It seems Surekha spurned Mohan's love, she told me so.'

Now tell me, what kind of clientele do you think are Surekha and Mohan in life, in love?

The Fallen Tower

The village was close by. In me was a cowardice and fear as never before. I was about to step into a village where a murder had taken place a couple of weeks ago. I was about to enter the world of a village where the village politicians played with crude bombs as if they were flower-balls. I was going into a jungle of vengeance and retribution.

It was a new experience. I felt it was not the village of ten years ago that I remembered. There was no bustle of farmers grazing cattle in the grassland close by. There was no sound of the carts coming from the opposing direction on the dirt path. There was no tinkling of the bells round the necks of the bullocks. No buffalos, no cattle. There was no sign of men.

'Is this a village or a burial ground?' I shuddered at the thought.

The doors of houses in the village were open. In the main street, the women sitting on the stoep stared at me and walked inside the houses. I came to the centre of the village, near the tower built during the times of Marathas. The usual crowd on the platform around the tower were not seen. I looked up the tower; there were some wild plants...once that tower was a symbol of the security and unity in the village. But now...dilapidated...

The old man stretched on the platform built round the tower, got up as he saw me. He coughed raucously and in between the gasps asked me "Whose house?"

I shuddered. I couldn't give my sister's or my brother-in-law's name. "Sithamma's house."

"How's Sithamma related to you?"

I said patiently, "My aunt."

"Which village are you from?"

"Tirupati"

I couldn't help shifting my briefcase into my right hand, take out the hand-kerchief from my trouser-pocket with my left hand and wipe sweat off my face. In fact Tirupati was only the place where I work. Avoiding further questions from him, I quickly crossed the tower and walked down the road to Lakshmakka's house.

In the front yard on the stoep, there were a couple of young people, who may be about twenty years old, talking softly as if it was some secret discussion. They stopped when I approached. Just then my *peddananna*, my father's elder brother, came out and was surprised to see me. He came close to me and held me by my hands. He tried to control his tears, couldn't, and hid his face in his overcloth. I sat on the stoep. He sat next to me. For about five or six minutes he didn't remove the over cloth from his face.

I was feeling very sad.

Pedananna controlled himself, and said, "*Orey* Krishnudu! Go and get some water for him to wash his feet."

Krishnudu brought water in a small vessel. *Pedananna* introduced Krishnudu and his friend as my brother-in-law's friends from the neighbouring village and said, "Let's go in."

I went in and sat on the cot in the central open space. Pedananna went inside. I didn't know how to face Lakshmakka and how to console her. It was difficult to handle things which you hadn't experienced earlier. Sithammatha came out along with Pedananna. She buckled up on the threshold, sobbing.

"These wretched people, should they take my son's life? We never meddled with anyone. We never harmed anyone. My curses won't go waste...Their houses will be infested with corpses...just watch out..."said Sithammatha as she wept, gesturing with her hands on her head.

"Please, control yourself, *Atha*," I somehow managed to say as my eyes filled with tears.

"How can I stop *nayana*? How do I keep quiet? Just look at your sister." Sithammatha stopped sobbing and said with tears in her eyes.

"Where's Lashmakka?" I asked.

Sithammatha turned her head and looked inside the house.

"She's in the store-room"

I got up, crossed the threshold, walked through the narrow corridor and into the store-room on the right. Lakshmakka was curled up on a mat there.

"Lakshmakka!" I couldn't contain my grief. *Akka* removed the hem of her sari from her face and said with a voice that betrayed grief, "I swore that until the fellow who killed your brother-in-law dies a dog's death I won't break these bangles. I won't wipe off the vermillion from my forehead. Tell me, you're educated, is it wrong to say that?"

I couldn't speak when I heard her say that. I could imagine her determination and the consequences. But I didn't know whether to warn her or to support her or to appreciate her.

I tried to avoid the topic and asked her, "Where are the children?"

"The elder one Sankaru had gone to our village and the younger one Vasu must have been sent to some relative's house. It's risky here." She said with concern.

"I didn't know that such a dreadful thing happened till I read the news in the papers." I said.

"You're somewhere, working for a living. I didn't ask them to write to you as I didn't want to trouble you. Anyway, we'll get on with our problems. Stay with us for a couple of days." said Lakshmakka.

"No, I've to leave tomorrow morning."

"If only your brother-in-law were alive...." She couldn't complete her sentence and wiped her tears with the hem of her sari.

Yes, if my brother-in-law were alive he would have insisted on my staying here at least for four or five days. When I had no job and nowhere to go, trying to escape my father's persistence to get me married, and was under tremendous pressure, the couple had given me shelter for six months. I couldn't make myself sit with her for long and walked into the open space in the middle of the house and sat on the cot.

"*Thatha!*" A ten–twelve- year old boy came in. Seeing me, he stopped short.

"You know, it's your *mama* who lives in Tirupati." Said *pedananna.*

He, Vasu smiled.

"What's the news?" asked *pedananna.*

"It seems the MLA's people had given our opposition party some rifles, *thatha*! They say with them one can fire from a distance." Said Vasu with excitement.

I was flabbergasted at his language, education and skill in investigation. A parrot's chick would sing like a parrot. One would learn whatever one is taught. That's what Vasu had learnt in his house and in his village.

"We don't need to fear anything Vasu, by tomorrow your brother Sankaru will bring bigger ones from our Mandal president." Said pedananna, stroking his moustaches spread across his cheeks that looked sunk with age and anxiety.

"Ok, *thatha,* tonight the opposition is going to send the police to raid our house. We have to keep our equipment safe," said Vasu.

"What's this equipment?" I asked as I know this word was not used in the sense of work equipment.

"That means... what we keep with us in case of emergency...things like bombs and pistols." Said pedananna as if he was telling me a secret.

I thought I was going crazy. This village and the atmosphere here looked horrendous to me.

It was dusk. There were no lights. The transformer got burnt a week ago. The house was lit by a couple of smoky lanterns and a couple of kerosene lamps. Lakshmakka sat leaning against a pillar. Sithammatha was cleaning vessels at the sink. Vasu went into the store room. Pedananna was lying stretched on the cot looking at the rafters on the ceiling. Krishnudu and his friend were there on the cots, meditating. Nobody was talking. Silence is alright in solitude. When there are people around silence becomes unbearable. I felt the darkness in the yard was better than the silence in the dim-lit insides of the house. But there was apprehension that anything might happen in the dark.

Pedananna said,' let's sit in the front yard' and both of us moved to the stoep in the front yard. I didn't know what I should say.

I wanted to ask him when and how the trouble started. Pedananna himself started to tell me. "Bad days have befallen us. These are not days when we can live together in unity. These are not days when we get busy with our own affairs. I warned your brother-in-law a year ago that the liquor

business won't click with a farmer. Your brother-in-law argued, "When things are getting difficult with the drought, do you think it's wise to let go a chance to get some extra income, that too what we got from the government in auction?" I thought it was ok. Your brother-in-law used to help people in need. That's why the needy in the village used to like him. On the other side they were also farmers. They became jealous. They started brewing arrack. Troublemakers appeared in the village. People who had nothing else to do started living off by creating trouble between others. One thing led to another. Our village which was never touched by caste differences became a victim of such a thing in the past ten years. Bombs were brought, grenades were brought. Treacherous killings started. At last it brought trouble to your sister. They hired people for ten thousand rupees and got your brother-in-law murdered." *Pedananna* couldn't continue as he was overcome with grief.

Meanwhile a few people came there and told him that they saw some strangers entering the village in the evening. All of them went into the house and discussed something. All of them left for their houses. When I remembered that I too did not belong to the village I understood how brave I was. We had our supper for the sake of it. I was an outsider who had come to console my sister on her bereavement. The opposition party was to create some trouble!

Pedananna, his relative Krishnudu, his friend and me all four of us slept in the court yard. Sithámmatha had her bed in the open space in the front yard. Lakshamakka and Vasu slept inside the house.

It was pitch dark outside. No sound. The courtyard was dimly lit by the simmered smoky lantern. I couldn't sleep.

I knew about these villages. This was the air I breathed once. I had eaten the jowar and the ragi grown here. Are these people the ones I knew? On one side frequent

droughts, on the other are families on the verge of destruction. These village politics of vengeance like 'arthritis on top of a hunchback'...what future does this place have? Would something dreadful take place today? Hope the outsiders won't raid the house. My mind was filled with a myriad doubts, strange fears and melancholy.

Never-ending thought...

It must be around midnight...

I was startled by the sound of a jeep. I wanted to sit down and looked at the other cots. Nobody stirred.

The jeep stopped in front of the house. The sound of boots. Police. The light of a torch switched on by one of the police. My heart started beating faster.

A constable woke up Sithammatha and asked her, "Is this Sanker Reddy's house?"

"Yes, *nayana*" She said.

"Is he at home?" asked the SI.

"No, *nayana*" said Sithammatha.

Switching on the torch light the SI asked, "Who's there sleeping?"

"Our people" said Sithammatha.

Meanwhile all of us got up.

My pedananna interrupted to say, "we came for the funeral rituals".

"It's our funeral. We got wireless information from the higher authority that there are a number of outsiders in the house. We must search the house." Said the SI.

It could be because of the suddenness of the incident or because of my cowardice, I couldn't speak a word.

The police wanted the doors to be opened. Sithammatha knocked and called Vasu. There was a sound of the cross-bar

removed, and then the bolt opening. Vasu opened the door. With the help of the torch light the SI went in and came out in five minutes.

The SI warned pedananna, "Look here, old man, don't you know that outsiders shouldn't come into the houses of 'parties'?"

"My daughter's house, *saar*!" said my pedananna.

"Ok" said the SI, turning to us he said, "Three of you, get into the jeep."

I wanted to ask for the search warrant and arrest warrant.

But if I asked, they might turn against us and conduct a search. Those weapons called equipment might be unearthed leading to a big problem. Any kind of argument was not good at that time. Along with the two relatives of my brother-in-law, I got into the jeep even without changing my dress. The village didn't wake up to those sounds. Or, even if they had, perhaps they were acting with caution! The search in the house of the person murdered was not similar to the search of the house of the person who committed the murder. I didn't understand the mystery.

I didn't know what paths and curves the jeep took in the dark. In about half an hour the jeep reached the police station. Leaving the three of us there, after a brief discussion with the constable there, the SI and his assistants left.

"Get into the lock-up." Said the old constable.

I got furious. "Why?" I asked.

The constable muttered to himself. I wanted to tell him who I was and warn him about the consequences. At the same time I was surprised to see the person who came out of another room. He too was surprised to see me there.

He was Jayaram. When I was studying for my Intermediate he was doing his BA. We were friends in the literary circles.

"When I heard the sound of the jeep I woke up. I thought it was the problem with our village. How come you are here?" he asked.

For a minute I felt ashamed. I explained briefly. He turned to the constable and said, "Kasim, arrange to get some cigarettes." He gave him a ten rupee note.

In that dead of the night some tea and cigarettes arrived. Kasim didn't threaten us again that he would throw us into the lock-up. Jayaram arranged for mats for the two people who accompanied me and asked them to sleep. We were talking till daybreak. He told me about the village politics, the murder that took place in the village three days ago, it was his duty to investigate the case, and the drought situation,,, he spoke about them impersonally. It was like a parable though he spoke in third person. If Jayaram were a writer he would have understood the Rayalaseema villages differently.

The SI came around seven in the morning.

Jayaram introduced me to the SI. The SI looked at me and said, "You and the two people who came with you may go, *saar!* One word of caution. It's good if you don't come to this place." He went into his chamber after giving me the advice.

"That's good" said jayaram

Both of us came out into the station veranda.

At the same time pedananna came there with my briefcase. He was happy to learn about the developments.

'The peril seems to have been over. Being such a big officer...you must have felt bad... Laksmakka sent me with some money. Sankar too came back early in the morning. He wanted to come with me, but I asked him not to. If we survive in this place, come to this village again." Then he came close to me and whispered in my ears, "This station had taken money from us also. That's why we're so bold. Apprehending trouble from the other party, Sankaru had already approached the Mandal president. I hope nothing happened here?"

By the time I came out of the effect of those words, pedananna left along with the two relatives of my brother-in-law.

Jayaram stood to a side laughing.

"Ok, bye Jayaram!" I said

Jayaram climbed down a couple of steps along with me and said, "Will you remember my words?"

"Ok, tell me." I said.

"You are a doctor. You know why cholera erupts. You don't get scared to go to a place where there's cholera. You know how to treat it with medicines. But the cholera called village politics...your medicines won't work here. This disease does not yield to physicians."

"Who can control it?" I asked unthinkingly.

He smiled a wry smile and said, "Yes, if I knew it why would I be here...contracted by this disease? If I survive this...I'll meet you at Tirupati."

Jayaram went into the police station.

My mind went amuck. 'What would happen to my sister's family? What would happen to Jayaram?

These villages....these people...

What virus causes this disease? What's the medicine that can control it?' I started thinking as I waited for the bus.

It's not enough in medical science to find out what virus causes a disease. The medicine should be discovered.

This problem is beyond my medical knowledge.

The Nodding Puppet

It is interesting to watch children playing. Their laughter, shouts, their unity, threatening one another, pleadings, mock fights, compromises, playing in groups, all these look like the preliminary stages of man's social life. I hate and detest those who hang on to class books, hems of their mothers' saris, fathers' fingers, grandfathers' shoulders, grandmothers' laps. Children's games and friendships are foundations of their future lives.

I felt happy when I watched from the window my son Chethu playing with his friends, the indigenous cricket with the stick and stub in the open space in front of the house. Chinni perhaps had gone to a neighbour's place along with her mother Meenakshi. Chinni was a girl, she had no freedom to play, nor was there an environment for it. She had to follow her mother like a calf, except when going to school.

The play stopped. It seemed Chethu was engaged in some skirmish with friends. Exactly at the same time I could see my cow and calf...that is Meenakshi and Chinni calling out to Chethu from the street. He was reluctant to go. The children surrounded her. She had convinced them and was dragging him along.

I pretended not to have noticed anything and sat down in the room flipping the pages of some book I could lay my hands on. She dragged Chethu into my room. He was kicking and resisting her.

"*Ayyo! Bruhadiswara!*" Meenakshi sat on the chair with her hands on her head. To tell you the truth I thought she

had some great problem. Whenever she said '*ayyo Bruhadiswara*' I was scared. Meenakshi loved and married me in the Bruhadiswara temple. Bruhadiswara was the god she believed in.

I looked at Meenakshi in askance.

"Your indulgence is spoiling Chethu."said Meenakshi.

"What has he done?" I asked casually.

"You want me to tell you?" She paused dramatically.

I didn't like to entertain complaints against children in their presence. I cajoled the children to go into the next room. Then I asked Meenakshi "Now, tell me."

Meenakshi started shouting at me. "What do you expect me to say? Chethu has been learning bad words. He has no fear, no respect. I've never heard a bad word in my house. If you don't take the name of god anytime, this is how it would be."

"Don't preach. Tell me what happened." I smiled. Meenakshi became furious.

"While playing he used bad words against a neighbour's child. Yesterday he abused Chinni. He also used bad words at school, Chinni told me."

I remembered all the bad words I learnt from my various friends in my childhood. "What were his words?" I was curious.

"Should I mouth them like our maid?" she asked angrily.

I didn't like it. "Why talk about the maid now?" I said.

"Because they don't have any morals or caste," said Meena whom I loved and married.

I controlled my anger and said, "The abusive words I learnt in my childhood were all learnt from people who had morals and caste. Why bother about it? Tell me what exactly happened."

Whatever she thought, she lowered her voice and said gently, "Ramu! You don't take care. Whatever I say, you want them to mix with everybody. I've been watching Chaitanya during these holidays. He has learnt a lot of bad words, has been in bad company, and has no respect for elders. I knew it's useless talking to you. I've written to my *appa*. He had watched Chethu in the last vacation. He wrote back that it's all because they don't teach about morals, religion, god and such things in the schools. He said we should put him in a good residential school. He has sent some addresses. I too have made some enquiries..."

Meenakshi paused to read my reaction.

I could well imagine what my father-in-law, who claimed to have Telugu blood in him but called himself a Tamil, would have written in English to his daughter in the name of inheriting tradition. Meenakshi, when I refused to enter the Bruhadiswara temple in Tanjore, said, "You have your beliefs, I have mine. You look at the art in the statues and I see love in the idol in the temple." It was not difficult for me to imagine what she would have written to her father. I remembered the puppet, the puppet that nodded its head when seated, which I found in the shop in front of the Bruhadiswara temple and bought it for Meenakshi as my first gift of love. I burst into peels of laughter and nodded my head. I nodded as I laughed looking at the puppet in the glass case in front of me.

Meenakshi said with an uncomfortable smile, "What's there to sit and laugh leisurely? I've decided to send Sethu to Sachila Vidyanikethan near Nellore after the vacation. We can afford to spend three hundred rupees a month with both our earnings put together...Chinni has taken after me and Chethu, after you.

I nodded. But I should admit one thing. I had known Meenakshi's decisions and the results. Otherwise she wouldn't have fallen in love with me who didn't belong to

her caste. She wouldn't have married me against the wishes of her people.

In such situations arguments don't work. We have to experience it. As a last resort I thought I should give it a try and told her what I knew about Sachila Vidyanikethan.

"There they call it a social life and shape children into people useless to the society..."

Meenakshi did not believe me. She sent for her brother. She put Chethu in Sachila Vidyanikethan. I would never forget how he looked at me before he left with his uncle. I remembered at the moment the look in the eyes of a relative who was convicted to life sentence.

The progress records from Sachila Vidyanikethan made Meenakshi proud. Chethu came home for the summer vacation. Chethu was not bubbling with energy as usual. He didn't go out to play. He stayed home the whole day. Watching him take special bath, meditate, study and especially chant *slokas* loudly, I went crazy. I was apprehensive that he would become a child mendicant. I felt that Meenakshi was as happy as Sankaracharya's mother must have felt. She told me in confidence, "Look here, Ramu! How much he has changed within a year! In this one month Chethu didn't speak a single bad word. My father was right. Children behave well only when they get lessons in religion."

I didn't want to argue with Meenakshi. I simply nodded. She knew my views. She wanted to prove that she had gained a victory over my views, the proof of victory over a human being, not over an inanimate thing.

Chethu was ten years old now. He was in sixth class. When he came home for vacation this time there were no special baths, meditation, *slokas* at home. He seemed to be going into a cocoon. He used to spend hours together watching children play in the open space in front of the house. He didn't bother when Meenakshi was irritated,

chided him or even when she exclaimed '*Ayyo Bruhadiswara!*' He never spoke a word. He used to take out the nodding puppet- the symbol of our love, into his hands from the glass case and keep watching it. Meenakshi wept saying that something was happening to Chethu, especially that he was not interested in eating food.

I understood Chethu to some extent. His vacation was coming to an end. He was hiding something from us. He stopped talking to Chinni. I took it casually.

He was to go back to Sachila Vidyanikethan in another couple of days. It was a Sunday. I had some work in the University. My friends told me a good children's film was showing. I got tickets from the Film Society and asked Meenakshi to go watch it with the two kids.

I came back in the evening and found Chethu very cheerful. "How was the film?" I asked Meenakshi.

"It was good. It seemed Chethu liked it."

"Did he tell you?"

"No" she said sadly, with her face averted.

"Ok, I'll ask him, Meena!" I said.

After supper in the evening I called Chethu to me. Meenakshi was in the next room stitching a frock for Chinni.

"How was the film?" I asked Chethu.

"It was good." Said Chethu.

I was about to ask him the story and he started:

"*Nanna*, in the film the white boys looked after the black boy so well! All of them played together. in the garden and woods. In our school Gurudevudu was a bad boy. So are the teachers. They don't allow me to be friendly with everybody. They don't allow me to play with them. I have to obey them otherwise they threaten me, and scold me. They beat me up

if I questioned anything. They're not as good as *amma* or Chinni. I don't want to study there."

"What about your classmates?" I asked with surprise.

"Our neighbours Vekatayya, Jenny, Jafar, Parvati...are good. They are better than those there. There it's all lies and falsehood...."

"Not everyone's good. What's important is , we should be good." I said.

"In that case what's the difference in being there or in this school here?" Chethu asked me.

"They don't teach well here..." I said at last.

"I'll study at home, if I don't understand, I'll ask you."

I didn't have an answer to that. "Ok, I'll talk to your mother." I said.Chethu looked at me with apprehension.

I had a detailed discussion with Meenakshi. Meenakshi had to agree to take him off the Sachila Vidyanikethan.

I told Chethu in the morning that we would put him in a school here. Immediately he nodded and ran out of the house.

I watched out of the window....

There, in the open ground in front of the house Chethu was playing indigenous cricket with his old friends, cheerfully.

After about four days, as I watched through the window...

Chethu was playing hop-scotch with Aparna and a couple of other girls in the open, happily, as dusk fell...

"*Ayyo, Bruhadiswara!*" Now I was not surprised that Meena didn't come to me with her exclamation.

The Difference

Srilatha and Raghava wanted to attend their colleague Naidu's wedding as he had scuttled all the hurdles and arranged their marriage. His wedding was at Rajampet.

"We can also go and see your parents on our way. We had met them only in Hyderabad on our wedding, a year ago." Suggested Srilatha.

Raghava did not agree immediately.

"Both of us are daily wage workers. Anyway we would lose a week's salary. I'll also lose a week's tuitions. In such situations we shouldn't be thinking of such things. What do you say?"

"Ok" said Raghava.

Rajampeta was a town, so it was ok. But her mother- in-law's house was in a remote village. Srilatha never expected that the house and the environment would be so hopeless. Raghava had sometimes told her about the village politics, murders, and their adamant ways, self-esteem and drought situation in the Cuddapah region. She had also read about them in the newspapers occasionally. Truth is harsher than discussions and news.

They had to change two buses after alighting from the train. After getting off the bus on the road they had to walk about a kilometre distance. As she was used to walking to the bus stop and waiting for the buses at Hyderabad, Srilatha did not find this difficult. But when she saw the surroundings of her mother-in-law's house, she was scared.

On one side of the village there were bare hills. On the other side there was a waterless rivulet with boulders in the middle. There were uncultivated fields with no trees in them. On the outskirts of the village there was a bit of greenery of groves with some trees here and there. The chimneys of the cement factories at a distance were spewing out smoke into the sky. There were a couple of neem trees in the village.

Her mother-in-law's house looked like a columned platform surrounded by a tall compound. As soon as you entered the house, on the right side was the cattle enclosure, cattle, dung, and cattle-feed; on the left was the cooking place dining place, stringed cots, and flies. Looking at the cots they arranged on the day of their arrival, Srilatha was reminded of the beds in the general wards of the government hospitals. The community life of animals and humans together seemed horrible to Srilatha. Nobody knew when there would be power during the day. During her one week stay in her mother-in-law's house, Srilatha remembered her birth place near Tenali at least five or six times.

The village where she was born...the lotus pond in the outskirts, everywhere there were full flowing canals watering the fields, green fields of paddy, seedlings in the fields, harvesting of the crops, winnowing, always full of busy people; coconut trees in the front and backyards, badam trees, flower beds; even in her house with one-acre land they had a coconut tree. There was a clean bed room. The cattle shed was away from the house. No dirth of water, no dirth of ventilation. There was no sign of poverty. In her mother-in-law's house there was dirth of everything.

Srilatha felt a little comforted that her mother-in-law's house was more spacious than her Bharatnagar flat in Hyderabad.

Comparing her mother's house and mother-in-law's house had resulted in a problem. The atmosphere in her

mother-in-law's house looked like a series of bonded duties. To Srilatha her mother-in-law and her husband's aunt seemed like bonded labourers in that house. Her mother-in-law got up early in the morning and from that time till late in the evening she would slog. She milked the cows, made butter milk, made coffee, cooked food, cleaned grain, fetched water, carried food to the fields, brought cattle feed from the enclosure, fed the cattle, watered them, cleaned them, cleaned the vessels; she looked like a robot to Srilatha. Her husband's aunt was an old woman aged seventy five years; she was bent at her waist. Srilatha observed that she was all the time working, either sweeping the floors, or gathering cow dung, or doing something else. When she observed them slogging away, Srilatha developed a respect for them as she respected her mother. But she did not form a favourable opinion about her father-in-law or brother-in-law.

Srilatha compared her father-in-law and brother-in-law with her father. Her father managed with the one acre of land and supported her to study for her MA, and also her helped her learn typewriting, taught her dignity of labour, helped her develop her individuality. Whereas her father-in-law spent all the time smoking beedi and chatting with people. Her brother-in-law did nothing but smoke cigarettes and discuss politics. Srilatha was irritated at their laziness, arrogance, worthless talk and shirking work. She knew shirkers in her office but not in her village. Srilatha found in her father-in-law and brother-in-law, the roots of such behaviour in her husband occasionally.

For two days Srilatha tried to find similar traits in her husband's younger brother too. In Diwakar who discontinued his studies with intermediate, she didn't find any such affinities. She couldn't but appreciate Diwakar who

was helping his mother fetch thirty-forty pots of water from the far-off well or bore-well. She spoke out her appreciation to Raghava. "He's not good for any other work" Raghava dismissed him. But he did not budge to lend a hand in fetching water. Srilatha discovered the arrogance of a post graduate in her husband who was working as a 'daily wager without orders'. 'He has proved now that he has no interest, respect or understanding of dignity of human labour', she thought.

On the third day of their arrival, Srilatha offered to help to fetch water. Initially her mother-in-law said, 'don't bother, we'll manage it." "Why do you bother, *vadhina,* I can do this." Said Diwakar. Srilatha insisted on taking the pot from her mother-in-law. Diwakar respected his sister-in-law for it. He also opened himself up before her. That day when they were relaxing, Diwakar asked her about their life in Hyderabad. He even discussed literature with her.

The next evening Srilatha suggested to Raghava, "Let's go to the garden".

"I've to go out on some work. Diwakar will take you out." Said Raghava looking at Diwakar.

Srilatha went to the outskirts of the village along with Diwakar. On the way Diwakar said, "There isn't much to see in these groves and gardens here, unlike what you have in your villages."

"Have you seen Tenali side?"

"Why not, Haven't I seen Telugu cinema?"

Srilatha appreciated Diwakar's wit and asked him, "What have you seen in Telugu cinema?"

"Why do you ask this *vadhina,* aren't our cinemas woven round Krishna and Godavari? Canals, coconut trees, paddy

fields, sugarcane crops, flower gardens...amidst the scenery you find much hopping and jumping taking place in suits and *panche* and also saris flying in the breeze. Those shots are taken in those villages, aren't they? What scenery can you find here? If films are shot here, the producers would become bankrupt. Even Lord Venkateswara cannot salvage the films." Srilatha joined Diwakar in his laughter and said, "Why do you say there's nothing here...you have this village and the cement factory in the distance..." she forgot that she detested the atmosphere when she said it spiritedly.

"I don't know much about the scenery in the film, but these cement factories have become the refuge for the farmers who have lost their lands. That's the progress we have made"

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, because of droughts, and debts they had to sell their lands. Once they sold their lands they had to work for a living. These lands are not fertile enough to support everybody who has lost lands, like the lands in your region."

Srilatha got evidence of Diwakar's intelligence. She thought for a while and said, "May be that's not the real reason. Perhaps people have not changed with the change in circumstances. Take for instance, my family. We have one acre of land. Father looks after the field and also grows some vegetables in the kitchen garden, has poultry. My mother has two buffaloes. She sells milk. They work hard."

"I think you are saying this keeping my father and brother in mind. Whatever they may be, they are not like the father and son duo in Premchand's novel 'Savadahanam', *vadhina!* "

Srilatha looked at Diwakar quizzically.

"Haven't you watched the film 'Oka Oori Katha' based on the novel *Kafan?*"

Srilatha understood. She had watched the film. She was surprised that Diwakar could read her mind. 'Why did such an intelligent fellow discontinue his education?' she became thoughtful.

Diwakar continued. "Father belongs to the old generation. He is steeped in the world of the fifty acres of land he had inherited before he got married, with farm labourers, visitors, and helpers. He is living in his old dreams. He has the rusted ego of the *pedda reddy*. Elder brother wants to earn easy money. He thinks he can make money if he is in politics, so he is involved in politics. He doesn't know one thing; that this kind of politics needs investment. I don't think he is clever enough to make deceit as his investment."

"What do you want to become?"

Diwakar was taken aback by her unexpected question. He gathered his thoughts and said looking at the chilly fields. "Me? This two-acre land is under cultivation. The other seven-acre land will yield crop for another year. Amidst all this my eldest sister-in-law fought for a division of property and left for her mother's house along with her two children, in a huff. I don't know what they want to divide, when the property is reaching the nadirs."

Srilatha didn't ask him what the nadirs are. She understood the condition of the family from his talk. Her doubts got confirmed when she saw the chilly farm with its meagre crop for want of water. She remembered the wasteful expenditure she witnessed in these four days of her stay here.

She understood that her husband would get nothing from the property which had reached the nadirs. She compared the life here with her own where both their earnings fetched

more than sixteen hundred rupees every month. She knew that they were better off. She thought she could take Diwakar along and get him some job of an attendant. Then she also knew that jobs were not easy to get. If Diwakar were not here things would get worse. She remembered how he reduced her mother-in-law's burden in fetching water. She felt ashamed that she was not in a position to help them.

As if to continue the conversation, she asked, "Why don't you study for your degree from our Open University?"

"Let the time come, *vadhina*! Whenever I get some time I've been reading some stuff or the other that I can borrow from my friend in the neighbouring village."

Srilatha was filled with remorse and she couldn't ask him what he read.

Plucking out a dried up chilly plant and flinging it away, Diwakar said, "Look *vadhina*! You have studied MA Sociology, brother studied M.Com. Brother told me you are working as a 'daily wager with orders' and his is 'daily wages without orders' for the past four years and are earning twenty five rupees per day. Here if not the women, the men workers get twenty rupees per day. In the factory they pay more than thirty five rupees. Which is better? Of course brother would say yours is better. But I think no work has a value of its own, just like there is no relation between your education and the job you're doing."

Srilatha was surprised that Diwakar belonged to her husband's family.

"It's getting dark. Let's go, *vadhina*!" Diwakar's words brought her back to this world.

The day before they left for Hyderabad, when they were alone, Srilatha discussed the life in her mother-in-law's place, especially Diwakar's future, with her husband.

"It's better that he's here. If he's not here that's the end of the farming. His discontinuing his education came in handy. Moreover the expenses for his studies were also saved. Because of him if the lands yield better crops for a couple of years, when we ask for our share, they may give us something."

Srilatha was shocked at her husband's farsightedness and his day dreams.

For about ten days after she went back to Hyderabad, Srilatha could not forget her in-laws' village and their house. Whenever she thought about it she was convinced that the reason for the bad shape they were in was their not changing with the changing times and not working hard enough. She was not very clear about the nature, environment of the village, and the economic principles in their house. After a couple of weeks she got into the grist to the mill of her office, tuitions and chores.

When she observed the shirkers at the office, and her husband who thrusted all the tuitions and household chores on her she remembered her father-in-law and brother-in-law. She compared Raghava with them. He was not very smart but not as bad as them, she thought. She compared her work with the slogging of her in-laws and got annoyed. Working women had more burden, she thought. She used to get all the more annoyed when she read stories or novels about the problems of women. She thought about the silent suffering of her mother-in-law and Raghava's aunt. 'How should they change with the changing times? How should they better their lives?' In her imagination their jobs became permanent, the land her father gave her got sold, and they bought a plot and built a house with the money. In her imagination sometimes her husband lost his job 'without orders'.

Srilatha was haunted by the thoughts of her in-laws' house for a long time. A year passed. There was no change in Srilatha's family life.

One day Srilatha got a letter from Diwakar:

Dear Srilatha *vadhina*,

Please pardon me for the errors I may commit in this letter because of my limited Intermediate knowledge. Excuse me for addressing you with a singular 'you'. But you must have got used to such language. Though you stayed with us for a week I developed respect for your ability to observe things. Not only that, you have a good heart. The land under cultivation has been lost to the debts. There won't be any cultivation for a year in the highland fields. By the way, when we walked along the groves you said that the reason for the bad shape we are in was our inability to change with the changing times and not respecting the dignity of labour.

You compare us with your parents; that your mother sells milk and that your father earns from his poultry and kitchen garden. I didn't speak out then, not because I didn't respect work, but more than such work I have developed faith in the work of labourers in the cement factory. That's the reason I've become one of them. I'm learning the value of labour.

I've snapped my ties with my family, except with my silently-suffering mother. I came out declaring that I don't want any share in the property. That's the only way I could find to get out of the quicksand. Otherwise they would look for the dowry I get when I marry. If I compromise with the situation I will either have to become like my father or like my brother in a few days. I'm not firm like my second brother Raghava.

If my father and brother understand at least now, it's better for them. Otherwise they get on like this for some

more time and then would depend on my mother's and sister-in-law's earning as labourers.

Do you think the story of our land and the life of the sons of the soil would ever change? Convey my regards to brother.

Affectionately yours,

Diwakar.

Srilatha read the letter again and again. She felt disturbed, anguished, felt remorseful. When she showed the letter to her husband he said rather harshly, "The fellow is capable of even going to prison…it's his funeral. Now there's no hope of getting anything from my parents. The only hope is the savings of your parents."

When she listened to her husband's abuses Srilatha felt that her twenty-year-old brother-in-law Diwakar looked much taller than her twenty-six-year-old husband. But she couldn't understand from where he inherited that quality in him!

Wings

It was obvious from their height and movements that those in the khaki dress were girls. In front of the police station, along with the old constable, they stood there looking around. Next to them there were three bags. Like us they too seemed to have been assigned election duty. As soon as the lorry, which was supposed to be taking us on our route, stopped, the three girls picked up the bags and stood behind the lorry. They looked about twenty or twenty-five years old, not older than my eldest daughter at home. They were doing the work that my daughters who were about their age, could not do. I was fascinated. But, suppose there was trouble while they were doing their duty, I was scared. As a father of daughters I got used to becoming apprehensive, anticipate trouble, and become scared.

Leaning against the rear end door on the right side of the lorry, I slipped into my thoughts. The girl who was in front looked up at me and said to her friends, 'what do we do now...let's ask them to open the rear door of the lorry'.

I too felt that it was a good idea. I looked at them once they climbed into the lorry. The POs and APOs were engrossed in their discussion. The Presiding Officer who was not taking part in the discussion looked complacent with his cigarette. The driver did not shut off the engine nor did he climb down. The cleaner too didn't bother to climb down. The Route Officer seemed to be inside the cabin. The constable had a talk with him. I wondered what I should do.

'Here, you stupid, didn't you climb tamarind trees when you were young?' so saying the girl at the back came to the front.

The old constable cautioned them in his hoarse voice. 'Take care, take care *thalli*, you're always in a hurry. You could slip and fall. At least get a stool from the station and climb up. By then 'the girl in a hurry' had already got into the lorry. She leaned out and as she extended her hand said, 'Is this a bathroom that I would slip and fall *Saar*? I don't need a stool or anything, first you hand over those bags to me.'

The girls standing there handed her the three bags. I helped the girl in the lorry in keeping her bags next to the gunny bag with the things for the polling.

'O.k. now you get in, both of you are a class by yourselves. What kind of Home guards are you? You feel jittery even to control the traffic. Now you will have to provide security in the village! We have to get on somehow. O.k. now, get in. Here, you get hold of my hand first. Press the step with your right boot, get hold of the rod there with your left hand and climb up.' Talking fast and laughing 'the girl in a hurry' helped them both into the lorry one after the other.

Our P.O Nageswara Rao, who was comfortably sitting on the gunny bag in the front, pleased with the entire scenario. He came and sat near the gunny bag next to me. One of the three girls muttered to herself: 'Is this the way to Thimmasamudram?'

'Why your Excellency, do you think this leads to the Indian Ocean? You are always suspicious. You never do anything without apprehensions. Didn't you see the nameplate on the lorry? Our 'pulav loving *saar*' also told us that this is the one. Once we reach there I hope you won't ask if the place is Nayudukandriga. They would snatch away our caps. We are not even the regular police to scare away the docile people. 'Am I not right, *saar*?' The 'girl in a hurry' turned to me and asked.

What could I say? I was familiar with the timidity of my children and I wanted to say 'Not everyone has your courage' but instead I only smiled. She too smiled in response. She turned to her friends and got busy chatting with them. I couldn't help admiring the friendly demeanour of the 'girl in a hurry'. The police constable remarked that the girl was in a hurry but I didn't think so. I thought that she was confident.

She was of slight built, medium height, had a thin oval face with a shapely nose and of wheatish complexion – not particularly beautiful but had an attractive face. Her eyes looked intelligent, mischievous, confident and non-challant. Her casual talk was impish and attractive. I thought she was a sprightly girl.

The lorry crossed the town and was on the dusty road. The sprightly girl paused in her conversation with her friends and addressed me. 'Which polling station are you assigned, *saar*?'

As if waiting for such a chance our Polling officer Nageswararao interrupted, 'Both of us are at Eruvapalem. I'm the presiding Officer, he's the APO.'

The girl looked at Nageswararao as if sizing him up and said, "Is it the Harijan ward in Eruvapalem?'

'Yes, that's the place.' I said.

'I am also assigned duty there, *saar*.'. Said the girl.

'You...there?' Nageswararao looked surprised.

'Yes *saar*... I've been... just as you have been assigned...and also like all these others' she pointed to all of us around her.

'Our...how many police personnel have been assigned our polling station?'

'Why *saar*? You don't seem to be willing to do the election duty unless you're given at least ten people.'

On hearing that one of the POs said laughing, 'The polling stations on this route are trouble free.'

The lecturer at the Arts College, who was the Presiding Officer for us in the last elections turned to Nageswararao and said, 'Don't you worry, your APO will look after everything and do everything. I had seen that in the last elections. He's a little serious type, but is an exceptionally good worker. All you have to do is to sit and sign the ballot papers.'

'I don't at all like to delegate all the work to the junior officers. An officer must work with a lot of responsibility'. Looking at the woman-home-guards and in particular at the sprightly girl, Nageswararao the PO said with arrogance.

The lecturer smiled at me and started talking to other friends. The discussion ended there.

It took more than an hour to reach the first polling station on the diversion en route Thimmasamudram. The PO. APO and the Home Guard alighted there.

The sprightly girls shouted to the Route Officer from the lorry:

'*Saar*, Route Officer*garu*, she's so dumb, please tell everyone to be good to her.'

'Alright, alright,' the Route Officer assured her.

Looking at the protective nature of our Home Guard, I thought that all girls should be like her.

Again we travelled on the Thimmasamudram road for another hour, and after another two Polling Officers and the apprehensive Home Guard alighted, our Home Guard told the lecturer who was the Presiding Officer; '*Saar, saar*, she's very suspicious by nature, please don't get offended by her and take care of her.'

'O.k. *amma*,' he said with a smile.

'Thank god! We needn't worry about them any more. Now only we are left. How much longer do we have to travel now? It seems to be getting dark.' The sprightly Home Guard said to me as if speaking to herself.

I didn't know the distance. Ours was the last polling station on that route. I didn't respond to her.

Meanwhile, Nageswararao picked up conversation with the girl. Now we were just the three of us on the lorry. Though I didn't intend to listen to Nagaeswararao, I couldn't help it. At first in a couple of short sentences he praised the girl's devotion to duty. Then he started to reel off, one by one about his education, job, status, powers, likes and dislikes- that he did his B.E. from the Engineering college at Kakinada, that he was the student chairman during his college days, that he was from a place close to Tadepalligudem, that he was from a rich and influential family, that he was working in the department of Roads and Buildings for the past five years, that his people were quite cultured and that he was very surprised to see that the girl was more cultured than the rest. I did not know why the girl didn't come out with any repartee. Perhaps she was not listening to him at all.

By the time we reached our polling station at the Harijan hamlet at Eruvapalem it was getting dark.

Our polling station was the school building half a kilometre away from the Harijan hamlet. We passed Eruvapalem which had no houses, the Malawada and the Harijanawada and reached our destination. When the lorry stopped Nageswararao got down. He asked me to hand him his briefcase and I did. He took it and without speaking a word walked a little away in the school compound, and stretching his limbs, lit a cigarette. In unloading the gunny bags with the polling materials, my small bag and her bag too it was the 'girl in a hurry' 'the sprightly girl' 'the woman-

home guard' who helped me. It was then that I made bold and asked her name. 'Pankajam', she said.

'Is the schoolteacher the Polling Officer here? I asked him to wait for us, wait and look after the arrangements. I'll go and send him. The sarpanch has been admitted in the Vellore hospital. The village munsiff and the karanam are absconding. Now we have to bear the burden.' The Route Officer remarked crossly and was about to climb the lorry and leave.

The schoolteacher arrived with a couple of children. They had two lanterns in their hands. The Route Officer had a word with the schoolteacher and left.

The children took our things to the schoolroom. It was a single rectangular room. It did have the doors on either side, but almost all the widow panes were broken. The room had two tables, two chairs with broken arms, and two benches. The box containing the school records was kept locked in one corner. On the left corner, the enclosure made with two bed sheets wrapped round a couple of bamboos serving as the 'booth' was kept ready.

Nageswararao, with the help of the children, dragged the two benches to the left wall and made his bed for the night. He then sat on the chair looking into his briefcase. Pankajam kept her bag near the wall on the right. I placed my bag in the middle of the room.

Walking around the room, looking at the faded photos of the leaders of the nation and silently reading the writings on the cardboards, Pankajam stopped at one place and read aloud 'Respect women'. 'You've written good sayings for the children' She turned to the teacher and appreciated him.

'Don't you have electricity here?' Nageswararao enquired of the teacher.

'The wires are drawn up to half a kilometre from here, *saar*. But in our localities we have to make do with kerosene lamps.' The schoolteacher laughed.

'Don't we get at least a petromax light?'

'I tried Saar, couldn't get. One of these lanterns is from my house, the other one is from the adult literacy centre in the Harijanwada. We can't help such inconveniences during the elections, sir... but have a wash first. There, a little farther is a bore-well. I have kept a bucket and a small vessel. Food should be ready in an hour. I have asked for a chicken. You're a non-vegetarian, I suppose?'

'Vegetarian' said Nageswararao.

'Please don't mind my asking you, but are you a brahmin, *saar*?' Pankajam asked Nageswararao.

'No, but we are vegetarians at home. We don't eat eggs either, none of our relatives do. But I won't mind your eating it.'

Pankajam said she was not that particular.

'We are used to it.' I said.

I have got *sambar* prepared', said the schoolteacher and he left along with the children.

Pankajam removed her cap and placed it aside. She took out her soap and came back after washing her face. Both Nageswararao and me walked to the bore-well. By the time we returned Pankajam was neatly dressed in a sari. She was combing her hair, and tied it into pony-tail. I noticed that Nageswararao was staring at Pankajam with lustful eyes.

During dinner, biting into a chicken piece Pankajam drew Nageswararao into conversation: 'While we are desperately trying to get rid of this useless brahminism, why are you people getting into the caste in the guise of kamma-brahmin and reddy-brahmin.

'So, you're a brahmin...Pankajam?' Nageswararao looked surprised.

'Yes, very much....by all means, we are Vaikhasanas. Of Bharadwaja Gothram. What do you think is our family name? Senadhipathya...! Now I'm in the service called the Home Guards on fifteen-rupee daily wages... it's a different matter...' Pankajam was rolling over with laughter.

In our house I had never seen such a happy atmosphere when we ate our food. I ate to my fill. We finished our dinner.

The schoolteacher suggested to Pankajam, 'Would you like to sleep in our house this night and come back here in the morning, sister?'

'I have no problem, *saar*. This is not a jungle. Besides I've these two *saars* with me' Pankajam replied.

I was surprised to see Pankajam treat the matter so casually. I felt that Nageswararao looked at Pankajam meaningfully. It could be just my imagination. The teacher and the people who came with him left with the empty vessels. Nageswararao lied down on the two benches. After a couple of minutes, looking up he said, 'I can't sleep if there's light.'

I put off the lantern on his side of the room. I lowered the wick of the other lantern and kept it in a corner near Pankajam. I slept in the middle of the room in the semi-darkness. Pankajam slept on the other side of the room.

I couldn't sleep immediately. I couldn't see anything outside the window. I could hear somebody singing accompanied by the single-stringed instrument.

What did you see alluring in me
what did you think my body looked like?
lord,

only desire, and no substance,
my face, in your eyes
was only a lump of flesh...?

The singer was repeating the verse on and on. In my childhood I had heard Siddamma sing that song many times. The singer paused for a while and took up another couplet

Born, you have taken the same path again,
Having come, you have desired it again.

Was it a dislike for the body, or a desire for salvation? Or was it a protection against the problems of life? My mind was disturbed. What would be Nageswararao's reaction to the song? What comment would Pankajam make perhaps with a smile? What would my daughters say about it? In any case it may not be the right way of looking at life. The song ended. The *teetuvu* bird's cry was heard at intervals....I didn't know when I fell asleep. I woke up at some sound. It was dark. I couldn't see anything. Even the lantern at the corner seemed to have flickered and died.

I could clearly hear Pankajam's voice resounded in the dark.

'What is it, PO *saar*, are you not able to sleep? Did you, by any chance mistake me for your wife?'

'Please, Pankajam, softly...' I heard Nageswararao's worried whisper.

I sat up and switched on the torchlight I had kept next to me. I saw Nageswararao standing near Pankajam's feet.

'Do you want to go out, *saar*?' I asked him.

'It's a new place...I couldn't sleep...thought I could go out and smoke a cigarette....It's so dark...couldn't find the door...' Nageswararao was confused in his reply.

It was an obvious lie. There was a door on the very side he was sleeping. And a smoker would surely have a

matchbox with him. I looked at Pankajam. She had calmly turned over the other side and fell asleep. With the help of torchlight Nageswararao stumbled to his bed and lit the lantern. He turned up the flame, opened the door, and went out for about five minutes.

Meanwhile, I called up '*Amma* Pankajam'. She was fast asleep. Nageswararao came in. He then turned down the flame and slept. I too fell asleep without any problem.

I heard the sound of the bore-well pump and woke up. I opened my smarting eyes and couldn't see anything around me. The lantern light must have died down. I looked at the time in the light of the torch – ten past five. That means it is early in the morning. When I looked with the help of the torch I found out that Nageswararao was not on his bed made of the benches. Pankajam too was not there. The doors on both sides were open. I went to the door.

I heard Pankajam: '*Saar*...PO *saar*! Don't come this way. I'm taking bath...not that there's any danger to my chastity, but for the sake of civility. Just wait for five minutes. Don't come here. Leave the lantern inside.

'*Saar*' I called out.

Nageswararao came in hastily with the lantern and fumbled out his explanation.

'Oh, you're up? Good. I don't feel alright in the stomach.' He clutched at his stomach.

'Come this way, I'll get you a bucket of water.' I said.

I walked along with Nageswararao some distance in the open space behind the school. I placed the lantern on the ground and stood at a distance. Nageswararao walked up and down for about fifteen minutes and came back.

'I feel better now' he said covering up his crooked mind.

'Ok then, let's start getting ready.' I said.

Nageswararao followed me back silently. When we reached the schoolroom Pankajam the Home Guard was already in her uniform and was tying up her shoe-laces.

'Why don't you too get ready?' she said unperturbed.

Our routine work for the Election Day began.

We started the polling at eight o'clock. The schoolteacher was one of the polling officers. The other polling officer came from the neighbouring village. There were two polling agents. There was no problem. The polling was rather dull. Pankajam worked hard at sending in the voters in an orderly manner. She didn't show any impatience. She worked efficiently and cheerfully. Nageswararao tried to be tough to begin with. He was authoritative. The two polling officers and I looked after all the work. It was fifty minutes past four in the evening. Seventy per cent of the polling was over.

'Let's pack up now. We have to fill in all the forms. There's a lot of procedure involved' said our PO Nageswararao.

'Let us continue for the remaining ten minutes.' I said.

'Who else will turn up now, it's silly.' He grumbled.

When about four minutes were left, Pankajam came in and reported, 'Saar, some thirty people are left now. Fifteen people are waiting outside and the rest of them are on their way within the distance of a hundred yards.'

'Nothing doing.' Said the PO when he perceived that the Agent had left.

'We have another three minutes, *saar*. They are labourers; they don't have leisure like us. Give them the slips and continue the polling even past five o'clock.' Said Pankajam.

'Considering the booth, I feel that is the right thing to do.' I said and both the polling officers supported me.

Our PO agreed reluctantly. If it were a polling booth in the area where the farmers lived he wouldn't have grumbled.

The polling ended at six o'clock. By seven the sealing of the Ballot Box, filling up of the forms, sealing them and so on was over. The schoolteacher was with us all along. The woman polling officer had left. As it was getting late the schoolteacher went out and got some rice, chutney and some butter milk for us.

Nageswararao didn't want to eat. We sat down to our meal.

Nageswararao started his lightening attack. 'They say there are cases of molestations at the police stations. Is it because there is a dearth of women police?'

I was shocked at the question.

Pankajam got up in the midst of her dinner and asked gravely, 'If it were a Telugu movie, your question would have sounded good enough, *saar*. But I find it distasteful. I don't understand how you are able to eat your food with the same mouth after you utter such words.'

Nageswararao was not daunted even after such a fatal blow. He was pleased with himself! He could speak so to a woman Home Guard. But could he, this gentleman, this officer, have said such things to a policeman? I thought.

The lorry arrived around eleven in the night. We reached the counting centre at an unearthly hour. After the work was over our PO disappeared without even saying good bye.

Pankajam came close to me to say 'bye'. There were tears in my eyes. I was moved.

'Why have you taken up this job, *amma*?' I asked her.

'What else can a girl who has failed her tenth class get, *saar*? There are four people who depend on me. I don't have a father. Whatever you do there are some problems everywhere, *saar*, especially for women who are looked down upon.' Pankajam said.

'That PO, the rascal...' I couldn't complete my sentence.

'He is a kind of a street dog *saar*. You just have to shoo it and it runs away...' Pankajam burst into laughter.... 'Are you wondering what I would do if mad dogs follow me...*saar*?'

I smiled uncomfortably.

'So long as men see only curves and body contours the problems would be as bad for me, your daughters or anyone else, even worse, *saar*. Tell me what would you do if you were me?'

I shuddered.

Pankajam said 'bye' with a smile. Piercing the darkness amidst the bright flowers strewn around by the *ramabanam* tree, Pankajam walked away briskly.

At that moment I realised how weak were the protective wings I had spread around my daughters.

Bogie No. S2

On my way I came across roads which were so deserted that I was reminded of the descriptions of royal roads in folk tales where one could encounter demons even in broad daylight. I experienced the same fright I had when I was ten years old and walked alone in the mountainous path on the outskirts of my village in the night; the shudder I had in that young age once when I walked along the cart-path in the bright noon when I encountered the rolling eyes of an owl in the crematorium; the shudder I had when I encountered crows and dogs tearing at the corpse of an animal in the deserted place; the anguish I felt when I was in Intermediate class and saw scattered pieces of about twenty-thirty sheep strewn along the railway lines while crossing the unmanned railway gate; the layers of grief, remorse and compunction that touched me a week ago when I read about the merciless killing of the milk man Yadagiri while he was gathering grass to feed his buffaloes, his only livelihood. Those layers of fear disappeared only when I was amidst people once I reached Nampally station.

It was a month since I had been in the midst of so many people. I saw strange faces. I heard different accents and dialects. Their faces did not have the stamp of their religion or caste. But looking at their dress, topies and beards I could know that they belonged to two different religions. I felt I was in an exhibition. I got back my cheer and energy. I wanted to first ensure the compartment and berth, leave my suitcase there, and then wanted to move among the people on the platform till the train moved. It was only threeo'clock. I had more than half an hour. I located the

bogie no. S2. Mine was the lower berth next to the window. I left my suitcase in my seat and asked the couple sitting on the berth to look after my suitcase and got onto the platform to move around the people . 'People' is a great word. 'We the people, people are we; no people, no us, no us, no people'. I thought they would make good lines in a poem.

The train started moving. I climbed into my bogie. There was no crowd at the door. I wanted to smoke a cigarette, and take my own time to get back to my seat. I turned away from the entrance and giving way to people, I lit my cigarette. Opposite the wash-basin leaning against the other door was the *sadhu.*

He was wearing a deep saffron coloured long shirt and lighter shade loin cloth. His clothes were soiled. The bag next to him was more soiled. He had a fair face and broad forehead, a long beard and shoulder length matted hair. He looked dispassionate, like a personification of the past, a statue.

The 'Ayodhya' events flashed in my memory. The days of communal violence in Hyderabad came to my mind. I didn't feel like standing there and moved towards my seat. I took out from the suitcase the African novel I began reading the previous day and pushed the suitcase under the berth. I opened the book where I had kept the bookmark. In the novel I encountered a series of incidents that depict the upbringing, familial relationship, the religious beliefs that get solidified in the blood of various people, the habits that have terrible influence on the people. I couldn't go ahead fast in my reading. My mind was once again disturbed. The train crossed Nalgonda district. I set aside my book and started looking out of the window. 'Perhaps there is nothing better than Nature to sooth the disturbed spirit', I thought.

In front of me was the sky in its many hues of ochre yellow mixed with lime in places, blue, and black and grey clouds. The setting sun looked like a clay wok. In the

uncultivated land and on the bunds of fields the acacia, palm, neem and other trees appeared and disappeared. A series of the jowar, castor and paddy fields raced backwards one after the other. Wherever there was green grassland, there were black, and white and brown calves, buffaloes with long horns with the she-buffaloes, brown cattle, and the black and white sheep grazed as a community. All of them were left behind. Looking at them I thought of the earth distributing her beauty and wealth like a mother. When I looked at the sky I felt that the chaotic dusk was invading the greenness. Behind the chaos, as if the gushing blood from the slit throats of children, from their wounds and severed limbs mixed with soil appeared dark in places, and I was terrified. Sri Sri's depiction of the horrendous dusk could not compare with the horrors that took place in the Twin cities. Why? There was pounding in my head. We crossed Miryalaguda. It was dark. I was looking into the darkness.

"How far are you travelling?" with that question in English I came back to the world of the train bogie.

"Madras" I said and then observed my co-passenger who asked me the question. He was a fair, short and thin man with a long nose and a thin grey crop of hair combed back from his forehead. Next to him, perhaps his wife, was very fair, with a broad face and a vermilion mark on her forehead as big as a four anna coin, she had parted her hair in the middle, was wearing a pearl chain and the chain with the *thali*, and two gold bangles on each wrist, she was wearing a silk sari with red dots. Her teeth were slightly protruded. She was a little heavier than her husband. Her face was that of a Tamil. Next to her on the seat was a Tamil magazine; in her hand was the magazine 'wisdom'. On the berth opposite were a young couple struggling with a child. I noticed that the middle aged person on the last seat was climbing to the upper berth.

The gentleman next to me, the person who drew me into conversation introduced himself. And then said, "We are also going to Madras." I didn't know how to continue the conversation with Mr. Ramaswami Ayyangar who spoke to me and introduced himself so casually. He said he retired five years ago as the Auditor General of the Postal Department. He had been living in Hyderabad for the past forty years. He had his own house in Malkajgiri. His eldest son lived in Bombay. His younger son and daughter lived in Madras. All of them were married and had settled in comfortable jobs. He led a care-free life.

I could see the eagerness for a conversational company of retired people in Ramaswamy. Some may take it as eccentricity. I didn't mind talking to such people. I thought that if I listened to someone forty years elder to me I would benefit from his experience. Moreover, it would be good to talk to him to clear off the one-month-old clouds in my mind. I wondered what topic would be good enough for the conversation with him. I am not talkative. I am also a little emotional, that's the trouble.

Ramaswamy continued in English:

"My daughter-in-law has given birth to a male child. We're going to see the child; we couldn't go three weeks ago."

"Why, you should have gone," I said without thinking, remembering that the Hyderabad-Madras Express was not stopped in spite of the curfew. Then I realised I was not very polite.

Ramaswamy didn't explain why they didn't go three weeks ago. He gave a lecture on the 'should' in my English sentence. He told me that he was one of the few who used 'should' correctly in the right situations, that even the English bosses appreciated it. He told me proudly that he was the student of the Vivekananda College in Madras. He

said that the knowledge of English his generation had was lacking in the present generation. They cannot even write a leave letter without errors. He showed disappointment at the degradation in language. He said that the reason was the weakening of the culture, that there was a connection between culture and cultivation, and that both words had the same root.

I felt that it was a familiar subject for me.

"In what way are they related?" I asked.

When he heard the question he changed the topic and asked me "I didn't get your name?" When Rramaswamy looked into my face I faltered and said, "Chandra". He didn't persist, much to my relief.

"Is Hyderabad your native place?"

"No, I'm from Kurnool district near Koyilakunta".

When I said that Ramaswamy started speaking Telugu fluently, "I have been to all the districts in Andhra. I'm from Tanjore district, on the banks of Kaveri, Thiruvayur. It's the birth place of Nadabrahmam Thyagaraja. Once I stayed for two days at Koyilakuntla on inspection work. When I went to Arlagadda I visited Ahobilam. In Kurnool, Cuddapah and Ananthapur districts there is shortage of water. They eat jowar rotis and a lot of chilly. And the people are there have a sharp temper and are tenacious. But they are good natured. Look at the people near Kaveri, Krishna and Godavari rivers, they have a different culture. The more water you drink and the more intelligent you become..."

Ramaswamy asked his wife for some water and concentrated in drinking water. I controlled my laughter with difficulty. Though I didn't really understand his logic, I asked him mischievously, "That means those who live close to the sea should be more intelligent, going by your argument..."

'We don't drink sea water, nor do we use it for agriculture. But the sea helps in trade. Thereby it helps enhancing the culture. Take for example Madras. Even now our classical music and our traditional arts are alive there. The temple culture there is also very great. The Kapaleswara temple is a symbol of that culture."

"I'm sorry my experience of the Madras temple culture was different. Last time when I went to Madras I stayed in Hotel Brindavan at Mylapur near Ramakrishna Mutt. Opposite to it was a temple and a dried up temple pond. Early morning when the devotees were going in a procession singing devotional songs, I peeped out. At that time I saw a couple of people defecating in the temple pond. All around was garbage, kiosks, business..."

It was good I stopped with that. I paused and looked at Ramaswamy's face.

He was pained when he said, "You're right. My daughter lives in Mylapur. There was a time when I used to get a lot of peace of mind when I visited the place. It's all changed now. With the advent of DMK the culture of Tamilnadu has been destroyed. They have provoked hatred for the Brahmins..."

"They are not Buddhists or Jains but they are Hindus aren't they?" I asked.

Ramaswamy looked at me with doubt as he said, "What's the use? They don't understand Bhagavad Gita. The caste is one thing and *karma* is quite another. Anyone can be born a Brahmin as per his *karma*. Then why hate brahminism? Wasn't Buddha a Brahmin? Wasn't Tirthankara a Brahmin? Weren't the Alwars and Nayanars Brahmins?"

As Ramaswamy was speaking unemotionally, we saw a young muslim holding Koran close to his chest passing by. A few others in light blue *lungis*, wearing topies walked with

him. I had observed people reciting Koran and doing namaz on trains. As they passed by Ramaswamy continued, "In my department there was a muslim, and I had recommended him for ten advance promotions for his efficiency..."

Then he said softly, as if telling me a secret, "I don't know why there should be such a hue and cry over Ayodhya I wonder why there should be so much trouble at Hyderabad. If they had agreed to build the mosque to a side there wouldn't have been so many conflicts, and so much violence."

I began to understand his mind and argument to some extent. 'Should I get into the discussion he has started? If I do, perhaps I would hurt him with my argument and emotion. Perhaps it's better not to get into an argument. People don't really change with arguments and counter arguments.' I was in a fix. I was debating to myself about the culture behind Ramaswamy's words and was silent.

Ramaswamy didn't give up, "I'll give you an example. I give discourses on 'Gita', in English, Tamil and Telugu. In my opinion the Gita is the last step of our Vedanta. My son in Bombay doesn't believe in anybody except Puttaparthi Sai Baba. He goes on a week long visit to Puttaparthi at least once a year. I don't believe in miracles. There no place for miracles in Vedanta. He has his own beliefs, but he respects my beliefs."

"He's your son, isn't he" I said.

I didn't know if Ramaswamy understood what I meant.

"All are equal whichever religion they belong to. There should be give and take in muslims too." Ramaswamy was about to continue, but as the train stopped at Nadikudi junction our discussion was interrupted.

Ramaswamy's wife silently handed him the water bottle he had emptied. I too alighted from the bogie with him and

looked back to see if the *sadhu* was still there at the door. He was not there.

On the platform where there were four taps fixed to a single cement fixture I saw him drinking water from a tap. The way he stood there made me think he was lame. The muslim boy was filling water in his can from the tap opposite to his. As Ramaswamy was filling water in his bottle I drank from the other tap and stood to a side to light my cigarette. I thought of a cartoon with the four taps on a cement fixture as four religions fixed to a centre pillar, and smiled to myself.

When I looked around I saw a guru in silk saffron robes wearing garlands standing amidst a few people. In the dim light I looked for the poor sadhu in the crowd, but he was not there. Perhaps Ramaswamy had seen the guru and devotees. He hurried close to the place with his water bottle, removed his slippers and joined his palms in obeisance from a distance and went into the bogie.

I got into the bogie and looked for the poor sadhu in his place. He was not there. At the door the two muslim young men observed the devotees and the guru at a distance. One of them said softly, "some great sadhu". The other murmured, "Their religious leader" and saw me and went inside the bogie. I felt uncomfortable at his hesitation.

As I approached my seat I saw the Ramaswamy couple had already opened their tiffin carrier and were eating their supper. The young woman in the opposite berth was feeding her child. Her husband was trying to help her.

Ramaswamy asked me if I had brought my food along.

I said, "I've ordered dinner, I'll have it at Guntur."

I saw that Ramaswamy was as interested in his food as he had in the discussion and thought 'Ramaswamy has interest in everything in life.'

Ramaswamy said wiping his hand clean, "My mother doesn't drink even water on the train."

"She belongs to the old generation, right?" I said.

"She lives in Thiruvayur. She's a devotee of Thyagarajaswamy. As for me, I'm interested in *karma* among bhakti, *jnanam* and *karma*.

"Perhaps because you are a working man."

"Isn't every creature a worker in one way or the other?" he counter questioned.

Though I caught the philosophy, I said provoking him, "There are thousands of people in the country without any work."

It was good he didn't get provoked. I wanted to get into the discussion and said, "At Nadikudi station you paid obeisance to the sadhu from a distance. But you didn't take cognisance of the poor sadhu who drank water from the tap next to you. I also observed the Muslims in the bogie. I don't think the attention they pay to the mullahs they pay to the poor fakirs. I have been thinking why we have such imbalance in our values and beliefs..."

I think Ramaswamy was taken aback by the unexpected turn in the discussion. He was quiet for a while and said softly, "I think the sadhu you referred to is the head of a mutt. I saw him somewhere. I felt like paying obeisance."

I didn't like Ramaswamy's compromise on the *bhaki, jnana, karma* paths and said, "I heard a Muslim in the bogie refer to him as a religious leader. Whoever he was, I saw him. I've heard about him. I feel pained to see gurus mixing up politics with religion and bringing in caste and communal feelings into politics. I feel angered at the helplessness in not able to stop such things. If we bundle all the castes and communal beliefs and burn them will the 'culture' you talked about not progress? I'm not old enough to advice you. If not

knowledge, as individuals let's know that we have our 'culture'. In the mass psychology such culture disappears. I think in our personality we have this vertical divide.

Ramaswamy looked at me with surprise. After a couple of minutes he said, "Perhaps the Muslims are responsible for this."

"You are talking about them as a group. Just like the Hindus fight with the Buddhists, Jains and the lower caste people, the Shias and Sunnies fight against each other. We saw the consequences now. Small groups, big groups, and factions, that's all. The colour changes as per your need. The need may be money, or power, or both.

After he got a taste of my argument, Ramaswamy didn't speak a word with me again. After we crossed Guntur I observed their problem with the berths. Ramaswamy's wife was old and couldn't climb the middle berth. I offered my lower berth to her and I said I would take the upper one. She thanked me but Ramaswamy didn't say a word to me.

I couldn't sleep that night. The people and the discussion in the bogie haunted me. A few times I climbed down my berth and went and sat in the conductor's seat smoking a cigarette hoping to ward off my unhappiness. In the bogie everyone was in his own sleep away from the rest. I understood that night how good it is if we are in our own world, without a care for others.

It was day break, dispelling darkness. Morning was stretching its limbs. The train reached Madras station. I approached Ramaswamy who was getting merged in the crowd moving to his destination, and said, "Sir, one minute."

He looked at me, confused. I said quickly, "Forgive me if I hurt you. You are elder to me. What you said was right. There should be give and take. Religion is a belief only. These days it knows only to take lives, not give, it's a pity."

He smiled a wry smile and started walking ahead to join his wife. I did not give up and spoke my mind out. "You must excuse me for one more thing. I did not tell you my real name. My name is Chandbasha. I'm a Telugu lecturer, so everyone calls me 'Chandra'.

Ramaswamy didn't open his lips. He moved towards his wife waiting for him at a distance.

"Kilpak fellow" I heard him telling his wife in Tamil.

Of Swords and Wagtails

Dr Rayudu became a professor in his thirty sixth year. He had created history in the department of history. This was a proof of the influence Rayudu wielded around the place. The present status of his family was not something to be ignored.

The joint family that Rayudu came from had a hundred acre land in Adavipalle near Railway Koduru. They had mango, orange, lemon, banana, sapota gardens and nurseries. Rayudu's elder brother had earned lakhs as a doctor. His second brother was the owner of a small industry. His younger brother headed a Mandal. A relative of his elder sister-in-law was a minister. The sister of his second brother's wife was an IAS officer. The father-in-law of his younger brother was a very influential person in Madras. He had a groundnut oil factory. Rayudu himself was a five acre coconut grove's husband. Rayudu's father-in-law did not like politics. If he needed he could buy off a couple of political bigwigs. In the city where his university was located, Rayudu had a ten acre plotted land. Foresight never goes waste, it is said. If a *yaksha* asked question like whether Rayudu had more money power or societal power even Dharmaraja would not be able to answer. The poets talk about gold mixed with copper. In fact only if there's gold can we talk about copper alloy.

Perhaps that's the reason Rayudu visited the intelligentia and administrators when he became a professor. The teacher community looked in surprise at the growing stature of the educationist. Some so-called intellectuals of the university praised him as the Pole Star of the university. If there are no

intellectuals to sing praises we wouldn't be able to identify the 'Pole Stars'.

The 'Pole Star' Rayudu of late had become crazy about the local history. It had a strong reason. Rayudu always believed that history is nothing but the natural inspiration of great people.

Rayudu and all his brothers decided that they should uproot their ancestral home in their village and build a new, modern building in its place. They gave the responsibility to the younger brother. As they were demolishing the old building they excavated an old treasure box. They discovered some ten swords, a few maces made of rose wood, and a bundle of palm leaves with some epic writings kept in a small box. The rumour was that they got gold. In the police investigation only the swords were recorded. They didn't bother about the Thalimkhana maces and the palm-leaf writings. As soon as he got the phone call Rayudu reached his village. He spoke to the police. He told the Archaeological department that he would start a museum in his department starting with the swords and maces. Thinking that they were not very old they let him do so. The swords, maces and the palm-leaf epic reached Rayudu's house. With that the fame of Rayudu family reached its pinnacles. The fame was visible from a few kilometres like the lamps along the path on the hills of Tirupathi. The local pundits spread the story that Rayudu's family must have been the descendants of either the Matliraju, or Krishnadevaraya, or Kakathiyas. Some other thinkers said they were perhaps descendants of Chola Dynasty. People who spread such stories were in some way or the other beneficiaries of Rayudu family. So what?

The excavations and the stories had some influences and consequences. First, it created inquisitiveness in Rayudu about his family history. Secondly, it provoked his parochialism. The swords discovered were not small in size.

They had artistic handles and were long, wide and heavy enough to slash with one stroke an innocent man at seven feet distance and with one foot forward it could slash someone at ten feet distance. As for the maces, no average man could lift them easily....the palm leaf poem was incomprehensible to the pundits of Chikatikota Ramakalyanam. Rayudu started with the long epic. A colleague in the Telugu literature research department saw it and said, 'this is another Rama story, dedicated to Chikatikota rulers'. When Rayudu asked for the explanations and gist of the writings, the researcher gave the gist as much as he could. Rayudu almost swooned when he read the gist. He thought that his family might have had some connection with the Chikatikota rulers. That's how Rayudu's inquisitiveness started. That's where the seeds of the research were planted.

While Rayudu was oscillating between inquisitiveness and the seed, a Telugu research scholar friend who had settled in America visited him. Rayudu showed him the swords. He told him about the epic.

The American Telugu friend asked him if he had read Alex Haley's 'Roots'.

Rayudu replied in the negative.

"In such situations along with the ancient scriptures you have to collect the oral history also," he advised him. "In the style of Roots you can write the history of your family," he encouraged him and left for America.

From that day Rayudu's search for his family history started with increased vigour.

He started reading Roots. The pages did not move fast. One day he saw Gaffoor who was working on his research project reading *Edu Tharalu*. He learnt that it was the abridged Telugu version of Roots, he took it and read it through. Then he thought, '*Edu tharalu*, the history of the

seven generations would be approximately of two hundred years. His family roots would be much more ancient. As the American Telugu friend said I should gather the oral history. The Gambian government declared the place where Kunta Kinte was born a national heritage! The place where I belong, Chikatikota, that is Chikati Durgam should be made a national monument. It's not difficult…the difficulty is to find out where it is situated in Andhra Pradesh and record the history of the surrounding place. This year I should get a paper presented in the All India History Congress to be held in Kurukshetra and out beat everyone. I should contest the President's position. I should get all evidences and guide M.Phil and Ph.D theses, write a book much superior to Roots.'

A strategy formulated in Rayudu's mind. He called his research students Rao and Gafoor home. He gave the palm leaf writings of Chikatikota Ramakalyanam to Rao. He asked him to find out the author of the scripture, to what age he belonged and other details along with his family tree. He gave Gafoor the responsibility of finding out where Chikatikota was and if it had another name like Chikati Durgam. Rao took the help of a friend researcher in the Telugu department and started struggling with the plam leaf scripture thinking that the dedication might be hidden in the obliterated words, and syllables disappeared in the holes of the palm leaves. Whatever work was given, Gafoor would do it with all dedication. He sat with a researcher of names of places in the Telugu department. He started searching the lists of villages, survey maps of places and old records. He looked into the records of the local state Archives. He sneezed a lot but did not get any results. He did not know what to do.

One evening his friend was lecturing on dry meat. "Have you ever eaten deer meat my brother Gafoor?" he asked. Gafoor said, "No".

'Some day I'll take you to my village and get you the taste of it." Said his room mate.

"Where do you get it?"

"In the forest near our place Vainest, in the forest there is an old fort called Chikati Durgam. There is a lake near the fort. It seems deer come there to drink water. Of course now the water in the lake has depleted..." the room mate was narrating with all concentration.

Chikati Durgam was the only word that got stuck in Gaffoor's mind and disturbed him.

"What did you say? A fort called Chikati Durgam? In which district is it?"

The room mate was irritated with Gafoor for interrupting his dream of deer meat.

"Why? Don't you know Vanipenta is in Cuddapah district? You are a student of History, brother!"

"Please, tell me about the Chikati Durgam. Do they call it Chikatikota also? I'll get you as many Bombay *parothas* as you want in the New Deluxe hotel. Give me more details." The moment he heard about Bombay *parothas* his room mate cooled down.

"I don't know all the details you students of History ask. But Valmiki told me they call it Chikatikota."

"Who's this Valmiki?"

"The old shepherd in my village."

"Is he alive?"

"Of course. Though he's past eighty, he is healthier than Morarji." He started laughing at his own incomplete joke.

Gafoor's mind started working fast. Through his room mate he got a clue for Professor Rayudu's research. In research you cannot discount the value of accidental

discoveries. If the apple had not fallen at that particular moment the world would not have come to know of Newton's Theory of Gravity.

Even before his room mate stopped his laughter Gaffoor ran to Rayudu's house. Rayudu was very pleased at the information. He thought for a while and said, "Why haven't you brought along your room mate? Thinking is ok with research. But work is more important." He spoke out the three precious sentences. Experience matters a lot.

"I thought I should inform you immediately" said Gafoor apologetically.

Rayudu was pleased that Gafoor had respect for him. He got some coffee and discussed with him the work to be done. As per the plan, Rayudu, Gaffoor, and his room mate would go to Vanipenta. Rayudu would write to his bosom friend in Cuddapah who was a CTO to arrange all the facilities in the guest house. After visiting the fort for a day Rayudu would be back. Gafoor should stay at Vanipenta for some time and record all the oral history available before he met Rayudu in Cuddapah. In a couple of weeks the research paper should be ready. In the following month in the congress at Kurukshetra the paper should raise a storm. That was the first phase. Rayudu did not discuss the subsequent phases with Gafoor. This was enough now.

Only Rayudu knew how the arrangements were made. In the place of the university NSS van the jeep from the engineering department arrived. The research group started off on their mission of unravelling the Chikatikota history. Each one felt excited in his own way. In Rayudu it was the excitement about his family. Gafoor was hopeful of getting some clues on his opinion about history with that journey. Gafoor's room mate was hoping that Rayudu would be pleased with the hospitality shown in his village and he would recommend him to the professor of Political Science.

The jeep reached the Vanipenta Forest Guest House around eleven in the morning. In about an hour Gafoor's roommate brought Valmiki to Rayudu and went into the village to arrange for lunch.

It was difficult to tell how old Valmiki was. He was six feet tall, wheatish complexion, stong body betraying hard work; a man with bone weight. He had a broad chest and a slender waist. Through his Kora sign loin cloth his flat belly was visible. On his shoulders was a patched ochre khadi towel. Though wrinkled, his face was bright. His thick grey hair joined his beard. His smile bared his strong row of white teeth. He looked gentle reminding one of Valmiki, the author of Ramayana.

Valmiki evoked respect in Gafoor. Rayudu felt an unknown discomfort. Gafoor told Valmiki the purpose of their visit. At first Valmiki smiled like an artist telling folk tales who tells stories for entertainment. Then he turned to Rayudu and said, 'The summer is not yet hot *saaru*, let's go. It's about a mile from here. We have to go on the cart path."

"I think we can come back before five in the afternoon, sir," Gafoor sought Rayudu's approval.

"Ok, let's go." Said Rayudu.

Meanwhile Gafoor's room mate brought lunch for them. Rayudu ate half a chicken and was full. In doing research even people like Rayudu had to face minor problems. By the time all of them had lunch it was two in the afternoon and the jeep started. On the uneven path made by firewood stealers in the forest, crossing thorns and bushes, the jeep went ahead like a rickety bullock cart.

Rayudu became thoughtful about the jungle rule. Gafoor was imagining history as a jungle fort. Gafoor's room mate was hoping to spot some deer. The jeep driver was driving

very carefully with the hope that Rayudu would appreciate his skill in driving along the uneven path and help the unemployed, tenth-class-pass brother of his to get a job at least as an attendant. Valmiki remembered the thick forest of his younger days. Valmiki remembered his ancestors of three generations who had connections with the fort. The jeep crossed another hillock. They could see hazily a fort at a distance. Rayudu's blood rose with a sense of belonging. The jeep was close to the fort. Rayudu was filled with excitement that the fort belonged to his valiant ancestors. The jeep stopped about two or three hundred yards away from the fort. As soon as it stopped Rayudu almost jumped out of it from the front seat. The rest of them climbed down from the rear seats. The driver also got down and stood examining the tyres.

"We have to go east. The entrance to the fort is on that side" said Valmiki and walked ahead. Behind him walked Rayudu, then Gafoor and behind him was his room mate.

It was an ochre coloured fort with four towers. Once it was in the midst of a thick forest, and as an evidence of it there were banyan, peepal, black berry and rosewood trees scattered around. There were a number of different shrubs around. The fort was four metres in height. It was built with stones of about two feet in height and width arranged like bricks. It was encircled by a deep moat. It must have been full of water once as there still was yellow streaks on the white rocks in it.

"This Sikatikota is small but is like a lion's den." Said Valmiki to Rayudu, who was examining it with all anxiety.

Though Rayudu was somewhat disappointed that the fort was not as big as Chandragiri or Golkonda forts, when Valmiki called it a lion's den he felt satisfied.

All of them reached the main entrance. A couple of birds in the shrubs close by flew into the air at the sound of human feet in boots and slippers and the voices. Rayudu was taken aback.

"What are those birds, *thatha*?' Gafoor asked Valmiki with curiosity.

"Oh, they are wagtails. You must have seen their colour. The time of your visit is good. This fort was built because of them."

Rayudu couldn't contain his curiosity. "How?" he asked.

"Oh, I'll tell you after we visit the fort." Valmiki said in his usual story-teller style.

Rayudu couldn't contain his curiosity. "Doesn't matter you can tell us as we walk ahead."

"The days of talking while walking are gone for me. Till recently I used to walk about two *amadas*. Now I'm getting on with age, *saaru*! I become short of breath..."

"You feel short of breath? I don't know what you eat but you look strong like the iron Ashoka pillars. We have trouble walking." Rayudu appreciated Valmiki. Gafoor's room mate went into peels of laughter at Rayudu's analogy of Ashoka pillar. Gafoor didn't laugh and Rrayudu did not notice it.

"My times were different, the people were different." Said Valmiki gravely.

"Because of that we are here. For you and for the fort," said Gafoor. Rayudu couldn't but appreciate his student's cleverness.

"*Abbo*! If the *maraja* had not seen the wagtails' mating would he have the good fortune to build the fort?" he paused and said, "You have a good look at the fort first." said Valmiki.

Rayudu was annoyed at Valmiki driving them ahead. 'The union of the wagtails...the good fortune to build the fort,' these words were playing in his mind.

They went through the door less, two-meter high main entrance into the fort. Rayudu was disappointed at the inside of the fort.

The shapeless dilapidated walls, the undistinguishable ruins of queen's chamber, king's chamber and the court, the mounds of earth, peels of lime, amidst them, around them were wild plants, a couple of anthills, a frightening sight of a big dilapidated well filled with wild growth of neem, and other wild plants. A little away from the well there was a temple in ruins. There was a nine pillared platform in front of the temple. There was no idol in the temple. In front of the platform there was the remains of the central column.

Seated on the edge of the platform Valmiki continued with his narration. "The *marajas* used to send the mountain goats with barrels to fetch water." Rayudu squatted on the platform edge and didn't ask him who the *marajas* were. His enthusiasm was punctured.

'What's the fun? After all the trouble we took to travel the distance, we don't even find the Archaeological Department's notice of protection of the heritage buildings. In the fort there were no signs of any past glory. There is no evidence. Perhaps the fort was not his ancestors'! It would be good if the old man tells something about the history. Anyway Gafoor would record it. It's good to return to Cuddapah at the earliest. At least I can enjoy the company of the CTO in the evening.'

Rayudu was discouraged and to suppress his irritation he lit a cigarette.

"*Thatha*! Tell us the story of the wagtails and the mountain goats' story at least now. I'll record it with the

help of this machine." Gafoor kept the tape-recorder close to Valmiki and moved aside.

Valmiki looked at the tape-recorder unemotionally and smiled. "I'll tell you. Whoever asks me, I've been telling them stories. In the *pingalinama* year... I don't remember how long ago it was, my grandfather's father told my grandfather, my grandfather told my father and my father told me...I'll tell you what it was...There was a maraj called Siripathi..." Valmiki tried to stifle a cough and Rayudu was all ears the moment he heard the name.

"Ok, what did I tell you, the Sripathi *maraja* once came with his troupe along with his hounds, spears, arrows to hunt, exactly to the place where the fort stands now. In the open place he saw a male wagtail mating the female one. He had studied quite a few scriptures. If a fort is built in the place where wagtails mate everything you touch turns into gold. The goddess of wealth will be at your beck and call. Siripathi *maraja* found an auspicious day from a priest and built this fort."

"How long ago?" Gafoor asked.

"My *abba* used to say it's some ten or twelve generations ago."

Valmiki waited for someone to ask more questions and then looked at Rayudu. Then he continued the story: "*Abbabba*! They had such glorious time; people say that there is a lot of treasure still in the place. There, on the north side there is a tunnel. The tunnel leads to a mine where there's a treasure. Some useless fellows in my childhood tried hard even with some sacrifices, but is the goddess of wealth so ignorant that she would come into the hands of anybody?"

"Is the tunnel still there?"

Valmiki slowly smiled at Rayudu's question and said, "No, the fort is dilapidated on the north, if you have noticed *saaru*! It's there buried under it. I remember to have seen the tunnel in my childhood. Now I don't know how much one has to dig. Why take all the trouble! The wealth of rajas has to go to the rocks, *saaru*! "

The driver who came into the fort just then said, "*Saar*, It's going to be dark anytime now. The headlights are not working, the road is bad, shall we go?"

Rayudu became aware of the time. It was already past five in the evening. Some birds were flying home in the sky. As he got up to go, the others too moved. As he walked towards the jeep Rayudu thought, 'I got a very important clue, no doubt about it. Valmiki's Siripathi and Thrupathi are the same people. Gafoor would surely make the old man sit in the guest house and make him tell the rest of the information. I can tell Gafoor and go back to Cuddapah.'

They were on their return journey. The jeep was making a lot of noise. Nobody spoke.

As soon as they reached the guest house Rayudu instructed Gafoor, "You complete the work in the night and come back to the municipal guest house at Cuddapah by ten in the morning. Then we'll leave for Thrupathi."

Gafoor agreed. Rayudu shook hands with Gafoor's room mate and thanked him profusely. The boy was overjoyed. Rayudu offered a twenty rupee note to Valmiki. "Why do I need this, *saaru*? Am I teaching some great tricks? I tell some simple stories. I live alone. I work as hard as I can. I earn my food. I have the charity house to sleep in." said Valmiki.

Rayudu thrust the money on Valmiki taking and left for Cuddapah in the jeep. Gafoor felt relieved now. Rayudu was not a person who talked freely with his students. He was very reserved and not very approachable.

Gafoor sat on the bed and asked Valmiki to sit on the chair close to him. Valmiki said" I feel more comfortable on the floor" and settled down on the floor. Gafoor too got down the bed and sat next to Valmiki. "*Thatha,* Tell me all you know about Chikati Durgam."

"*Abbo*! If I have to narrate everything I know it would take two nights. In the story there are many small anecdotes." Said Valmiki.

"Ok, tell me why it got the name Chikati Durgam." Gafoor slowly drew him into the mood to tell the story. Gafoor's room mate was not very interested in these things and left the place to arrange for dinner.

Valmiki closed his eyes and started his narration:

"I gave you the name Siripathi... his family name was *Sikat*. They were rich. They say that he was the first one to build the fort. His relatives who had their family name as *Durgam* killed him and occupied the fort and they became known as *Sikati Durgam* family, this is what people say. It happened like this...Siripathi was the son of the *maraja* Sikati Pakirreddy. He was a good man. When the villages around were attacked by dacoits he got the towers built, he also arranged guards. I told you about the mountain goats fetching water...Siripathi's father Pakirreddy was responsible for it. Siripathi raju had a daughter. He had got her married into the family called Durgam family. The son-in-law plotted against him as he was young and he could marry again. In such case if he begot a son, the son-in-law would lose the right to the fort.

The son-in-law joined hands with a farmhand of Duvvuru and got his father-in-law killed. The Duvvuru farmhand and the Midakuru farmhand came again on two hundred horses and killed the son-in-law who killed the father-in-law. The Midakuru farmhand later invaded the Duvvuru farmhand with five hundred horses, with the help of the Marathis and

usurped the fort. There was a relative of Thirupalanayudu called Thirupathi Rayudu, I think he was my grandfather's generation. He was friends with dacoits. He thought the fort would be a convenient place to camp when he went on dacoities and he made friends with Midakuri farmhand. He asked him to give him the fort for whatever price he wanted. The farmhand believed only in money. In fact when Thirupathi Rayudu came into power the village fell into bad days. One day Sitteripalle was attacked another day Lekkaloripalle would be attacked and yet another day it would be the turn of another village...the cattle grazing in the forest would be abducted...there was total anarchy. When the white men came into power Thirupathi Rayudu, in his old age gathered all he could and went into exile along with his family. There was famine and nobody was left in the fort to even light a lamp. The Sikati Durgam was enveloped in darkness..."

Valmiki paused.

Gafoor was totally confused. The names and the kinship were all very confusing. "Ok, what caste do the rulers in the fort belong to?"

He asked hesitantly.

"What caste do the rulers and servants have? They belong to the ruling class and servant class...." Valmiki burst into laughter.

"You said Pakkirreddy, Siripathi Raraja, Thirupala Nayudu, Thirupathi Rayudu...It's all strange."

"Oh, that! I know what you're asking. I mentioned Pakkirreddy. They belong to our caste... the valmikis...tribals...they were...bonded...later they helped with fights and became reddys. Pakkirreddy became a kin of Ekari Nayudu. Sword helped another sword...they became families of reddys...later they merged with kamma nayudus...among them there were people who got their

daughters married to the white men, my grandfather used to tell my father."

"There are quite a few stories. If they bribe the priests, they would pronounce them as descendants of either Dharmaraja or Ram. But, caste is for people like you and me, not for *marajas*, it's crazy..."

Gafoor was bowled over by Valmikis analysis. He could not quite understand the dates in the story but he felt happy that if he examined the entire thing he might get some important matter out of it. Suddenly it struck him that there could be some songs about the fort. He asked Valmiki.

"I'm not able to recall...wait...yes I think I heard something on Thirupathi Rayudu in my childhood...I'll sing it as much as I can recall...ok:

'Ayyare Sikati Durgam Thirupathi Raya,
Damn you ...how cunning are you
You've tricked the short Nawab
Managed the Marathi cavalry
Sent the farmhand to his grave
Bootlicked the whiteman
Brought in the rule of the dacoits
Taxed us, terrorised us
As if that's not enough
Took into your fold tricksters
Made the stolen property your own
Stolen cattle seem better for sacrifice
Ayyare Thirupathi Raya...'

I don't recall more...no one else knows...is that ok?"

Gafoor stopped the tape-recorder and took Valmiki's hands into his, "Peddayya.. I've given you a lot of trouble." He apologised.

Looking at the tape-recorder Valmiki said, "It's just to let out our steam....what the use of these stories?"

Gafoor didn't know how to answer him. He forced another twenty rupee note into his hands and touched his eyes with Valmiki's palms. Valmiki was touched. Looking at Valmiki walking away in the dark Gafoor thought of him as walking history. He did not know why Valmiki said the stories were just useless. Thinking of those words made Gafoor feel disturbed. Disturbance in the mind does not go waste.

After returning to the university sleep evaded Gafoor for almost a week. The research paper was ready. He gave it the title 'An Ever Forgotten History: The Case of the Dark Fort' and felt very happy. He wrote Rayudu's name as the first author and his name as the second. He gave the typed copy to Rayudu. Rayudu was floored by the title.

'With this stroke he would become the president not just for this term but permanently...Vice Chancellor...why...a bigger position will be offered to me' he thought.

"I'll read it leisurely and will tell you if any changes are necessary...ok...give me the tape and the entire notes. By the way you are coming to the Kurukshetra Congress along with me..."

With Rayudu's encouraging words Gafoor's research soul felt happy. He didn't keep anything with him and laid bare the tape and the notes in front of Rayudu.

'He's giving me a good opportunity. These are signs of offering me a lecturer's position in the department...' thought Gafoor.

Rayudu called for Rao. He said, "Look here, Rao, what's the progress you've made with the history of the epic I gave you?"

"Look at the paper Gafoor has written. He's better than you. He finished the work fast. Anyway, first listen to the tape, then read the notes and then read the paper with concentration. I'll need your comments urgently."

"I'll present my comments in the form of notes within two days, sir." Rao in his habitual obedient style took the paper bending half, again bent down in obeisance and came out. He had been jealous of Gafoor who stood as a strong contender for the lecturer's position yet to be advertised. He was happy that he got an opportunity now.

He listened to the tape, read the notes. Read the paper a couple of times. He compared the details his fellow researcher took about the origins of Chikatikota Ramakalyanam and the oral history, and also the paper that Gafoor had written.

"You Gafoor! You have proved yourself again! You haven't stopped seeing the professor's people through your coloured glasses! How dangerous are your proposals! You dare say that the observation of the family tree reveals that they don't belong to the same caste? How dare you say that the caste of the past rulers who had lost later came into existence again? You say it's the same with the religion as well? How dare you say that those who participated in the local revolution had nothing but selfish motives? You dare say that the history of the swords that stifled people is the history of the countries? How could you make a rotten comment that the history of the farmhands is the micro-image of the history of the royal families? Wait...I'll teach you a lesson...

The termite eaten letters of the history of Chikatikota Ramakalyanam writings assumed new shape in the hands of Rao.

Chikatikota rulers wore the garb of valiant, generous, kind, wealthy brilliant persons who drove away alien invaders. The story of the wagtails became a symbol of the rulers' family morals of men and women.

The language of slavery has embellishment.

He went to Rayudu's place, assessed his mood, and gave him the family tree. Rayudu's eyes widened with amazement. Then he presented the essay he had written. Then he told all he wanted to about Gafoor's paper. He provoked him the way he wanted and left happily.

Rayudu read everything patiently. He listened to the tape for the first time. Normally Rayudu never read anything that was presented in his name.

That night sleep evaded Rayudu. He dreamt that Gafoor attacked his family tree with swords. In the dream Gafoor's wagtail became a plover and cried raucously in his ears.

Early next morning he sent for Gafoor and handed over the order he kept ready relieving him from the project.

Gafoor was shocked to read the order. Rayudu gave his message in a calm tone, "When you write history what is needed is not your emotions and biases. What is necessary is a respect, devotion and sympathy for those who make history. Learn from Rao. You'll come up elsewhere at least."

Gafoor understood everything.

Gafoor wanted to spit out his anger.

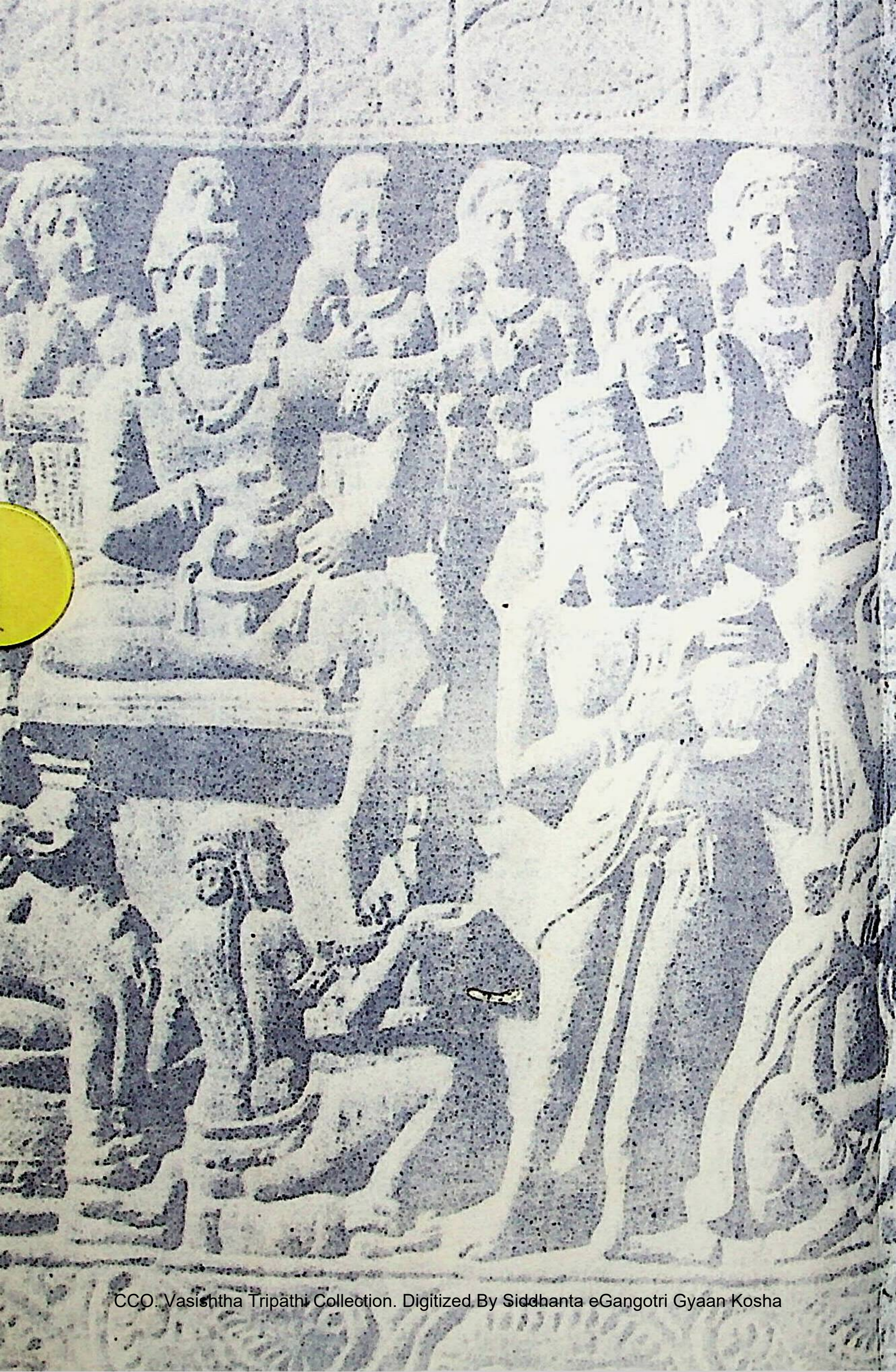
Gafoor couldn't speak a word at the blow Rayudu struck. He remembered the hard work his tailor father put in at his village in sending him for his education. He remembered the five mouths in the family that waited to be fed. Tears welled up in his eyes. His lips tightened with emotion, grief and pain and he restrained himself, his anguish.

'The builders of history are looked at with sympathy by people like you. Respect? To have that one has to sell his soul. Devotion? One has to become a pet dog.'

He cast one glance at Rayudu, a look of detest for a poisonous insect and said 'Thanks' in an unemotional tone and walked out.

What Rayudu thought would happen never happened. Gafoor did not plead with him. Rayudu became mad with anger. On top of it, that look in his eyes! And that word of thanks!

Rayudu shouted at the attendant and closed his doors. He tore off the paper Gafoor wrote and the tape crazily. As he looked at the pieces, he broke into heavy sweat. Amidst the pieces Gafoor's parting look haunted Thirupathi Rayudu of Chikatidurgam who became known as Professor Rayudu.





Collection of short stories by Kethu Viswanatha Reddy has the distinction of winning three awards - Telugu University Award, Bharatiya Bhasha Parishat Award and Sahitya Akademi Award (The National Academy of Letters, India). The stories offer a kaleidoscopic view of life and society. Each story depicts men and manners in different moods and emotions and carries a distinct flavour of Telugu regional culture.

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